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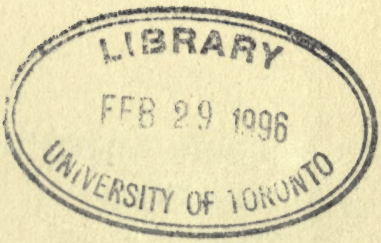
MILLS & BOON, LIMITED
49 RUPERT STREET
LONDON, W. 1

Published 1921



TO

MY WIFE

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SOMERSET NEIGHBOURS

CHAPTER I

I COME TO HAWKESCOMBE

IN Somerset there are miles and miles of wild country high on the hills which seem too remote for the ordinary visitor to reach. But the tiny villages which nestle in its combes hold treasures of beauty little dreamed of by those who pass them by. I speak not only of things, but of human lives, and think of my own village, Hawkescombe.

From the summit of its highest hill, some nine hundred feet above sea-level, over which buzzards often circle, the view is wonderful. The range of which this height forms part is in the shape of a crescent, or sickle, with its back humped up against north and north-east winds which otherwise would sweep upon the village without a check over miles and miles of lowlands. To the east are the Mendips, many miles away, and north-west lie the Blackdowns with the Vale of

Taunton just below. A near cluster of red roofs marks Hawkescombe's market town. The rich country between it and the village has many streams fringed with loose-strife, willow-herb, meadow-sweet, and forget-me-not, and its meadows of bright emerald green are spangled in their seasons with cowslips, oxlips, and wild orchids. The copses seen here and there are carpeted in spring and summer with Lent-lilies, primroses, violets, anemones, bluebells, and foxgloves. The ploughed fields are splendid with rich, warm, old red sandstone and marl.

On one high knap the badger earths are. It stands as a sentinel for the great wood of heavy forest timber, oak, ash, chestnut, and pine, which falls away below it to the river. To the west a purple fringe marks Exmoor, and in the bite of the hills the Bristol Channel gleams like a jewel. Between it and Hawkescombe a hanging larchwood is where the woodcock breeds. The high down to the north is where I last saw a honey buzzard, and in the field below I found, only last season, a quail nestling.

It is a great country for birds. On the far sea cliffs are ravens ; yes, and a peregrine's eyrie. The golden commons of gorse and broom and bracken have thickets of brambles sacred to the red-backed shrike and the scolding chats. Far

below Hawkescombe hill one moss-grown peaty bog, carpeted with spagnum moss, with patches of marsh-marigold, iris, and bulrush, is the breeding-ground of snipe, and the lane running along two sides of it, with overgrown and tangled hedges which are a smother of honeysuckle and old man's beard, is a veritable heaven of warblers. The bubbling burn which divides our parish from the next is full of trout and a haunt of dippers.

What brought me here to Hawkescombe ? In what appeared to me an evil hour the " medicine men " forbade me to hold a parish of my own. They laid me on the shelf. And yet, as they still allowed me to do a little work, I could regard myself as in harness, rather than as permanently turned out to grass. Somerset was the county in which I decided to find a home, for it is one with many parsons, struggling in scattered parishes, who need help badly. It affords unrivalled opportunities for the indulgence in leisure hours of my youthful hobby, natural history. And it is rich, as I have long since proved, in the very kindest, most ingenuous, and lovable of country folk. I love it, every bit of it : and I love them, every one of them !

I realised with trepidation that I was coming a stranger among strangers, and that I might, too,

easily run counter to Hawkescombe's ancient traditions. But very soon the villagers made all plain to us. The foundations of village life had been well and truly laid of old on the rock of mutual loving service and respect, and the spirit of real neighbourliness still persisted, only needing reverent protection against frost to render the fabric as secure as ever. The whole atmosphere breathed loyalty and affection. Not that they are a folk who wear their hearts upon their sleeves ! With them appearance goes for little, and profession even less ; they watch and read between the lines ; are overshrewd at sucking the marrow-bone of motive dry, and seldom make a bad mistake in judgment. Which means, of course, that they are slow to change or be convinced. But once satisfied, they trust ; the battle's won and nothing is withheld.

The village lies hidden from the busy world. Those who pass along the high road might never know of its existence. But if they left it, and, passing by the sandpits, alive with martins sailing in and out of their burrows, went down the side of this wood, where we come to listen to the woodlark's song of an evening, then they would come upon Hawkescombe. Brooding over all below, and standing out from among the limes and yew

trees, is the splendid old church tower of Hamhill stone, toned and weathered to lovely gold and russets. By the lych-gate stands the ancient preaching cross. The rectory is near, but hidden in the trees. A step beyond the church gives a glimpse of the grey stone gables of the Manor House, my shelf. From there the zigzag road winds its halting way downhill, across the stream, and by easier stages creeps up the farther side of the valley. The cottages sprinkled on either side of it are stone built and mostly roofed with thatch, in the more exposed situations with stone field slates, while here and there is a bit of wall or barton built of red mud or wattle.

There is not a cottage that I do not know. Close to the church is the humble but beautiful dwelling of Jim and Martha Webb. It was Jim who buried his master's charger as near the church as might be. And if a tubby figure is ever seen by the lych-gate or the ancient preaching cross, it will be that of our parish clerk and sexton, Ben Brindle, always thirsting for a gossip. An oval patch of emerald green is the cricket ground, where Brace, the keeper, and his arch-enemy Knight, the poacher, made the great catch which should become historic. From the cricket ground the road winds down across a stream, and, half-way, a white cottage, gleaming against a

clump of dark pines, is the home of crazy 'Ria. Beyond it stands Fuchsia Cottage, where I have often tried in vain to get a word in edgeways with Louisa Knibb. The farm near it is owned by Levi Keitch, explorer of the milky way, to put it so. The cottage at the cross-roads is where dear Letty Marchant, our wild dancer, had the trouble of her life solved. Upon the very crest of Stooper's Knapp is the home of " Rickety " Rickman, the village cobbler, and dear old Jenny his wife, who will " tell " with me no more. The rocky downs to the west are sacred to the profound philosophy and ethics of our splendid shepherd, Silas Noldart. With glasses can be seen beyond the downs a dark outcrop of rock standing up against the evening sky, and just beneath it a brown speck, like a mole on a man's chin, which was the house of Pat Lambert, the outcast. Away south, in a fold of the downs, dwell the notable churchwarden, Sam Barton, and his neighbour, that voluble old seaman, Peter Austin, an equally interesting upholder of law and order. That derelict farmstead standing alone in the bottom once housed Philip Creech, whose last will and testament may cost some pains to decipher. That is the house of 'Appy, the carter, a man of one great speciality, and not far from it is dear old John Gobbler's forge, the shrine of many memories.

All these wild open moors and bracing downs stretched out before us breed a splendid race of hill-folk proud of their descent, and of somewhat plain and open speech. Yet I love them, and they know it ; how much I owe them they will never know.

CHAPTER II

THE SHEPHERD ON THE HILLS

MARCH had come in like a lion, as it should do traditionally, and it was still early in the month when I was caught in a veritable blizzard of snow, with a biting north wind, and had to take shelter. I shared it with Silas Noldart, the shepherd, an old friend of mine, whom I found cutting bread and cheese upon his knee as he crouched under the lee of a thatched hurdle on the downs.

Silas is seventy, hard and gnarled as a pollard oak, with a mass of white hair and a venerable beard flowing down his smock. He pulled his forelock, by way of obeisance, as I paused for a breather and snuggled down beside him. A glorious panorama of hill and dale was spread out at our feet, and in the bright intervals between the storms we could see forty miles away to the west.

"Your lambs play as if they enjoyed this weather, Noldart," I began.

"Aye, I likes to see 'em lep about," he replied,

" 'tis a sign of 'ealth. We done the same in our day, sir, I doubt ; but they'm a-thought more lordly wi' the yeos at meal times nor we was. Fruzzling their tails is their way o' asking a blessing from the only God they knows—mother."

" Yes ; it's a fine sheep-running down round about here."

" Aye—well favoured for the she'p. They do lep, don't 'em ? Catched it from this country they'm bred in, likely. When Israel come to take him a change o' pasture out o' Egypt, this 'ere country was young, I doubt, and overreached itself capering and skipping in honour of the festival, I reckon ; and by a shift o' the wind or some'at, got left in 'ills and 'ummocks afore they could on-stretch theirselves."

" You read your psalms then, Noldart ? "

" Can't read a word, sir—but I've 'eard 'em say about it. Wonnerful human things is she'p, or I suppose, as they was made fust, we should say wonnerful she'ply things is humans. ' Gone astray like a she'p,' we say : they fangles through the 'edges and gets a brimble in their trousers, and calls for the shepherd to pick it out and take 'em back again. 'Tis the same wi' we, ain't it ? "

" And where do you go to church, Noldart ? "

" Church going or chapel going is on-possible, sir, for I. We'm all a sweet smelling savour, and coming afore Him He'll know our trade by the smell o' we and say : ' You'm a shepherd, chapel be excused ; I got another flock for you 'ere : 'tis what I fitted you for, so o' course you'm fit for nothing else—take on this lot.'

" Then there's the lost she'p : how the yeo fusses about it for a time—doesn't know where 'tis to, and no use for me to explain as 'tis all right, and *we* knows. 'Tis so with ours and God, if we'd only be content : He can't explain, and we shouldn't be understanding if He did."

As we sat and chatted thus, the snow still falling in gusts and Noldart still munching his bread and cheese, a friendly and inquisitive redbreast perched upon a hurdle in front of us, on the look out for crumbs.

" I never see one o' them things," said my friend, pointing at it with his knife, " but what I think of Mary Stimmer's youngest brat what was also a lost she'p. Stimmers was a carter, but 'e took 'im a bad cold one Feb'ury which put 'im out in one puff : and soon after the child was borned. I'd knowed Mary from a girl, and me and Stimmers 'ad schooled together. And she say to me, ' Silas, you must come and stand godsire to the boy : I got no one now my man's gone

to give an eye to 'im as 'e grows up : 'twould be neighbourly-like and that.' You see, she done a bit o' mending and cooking for I, times. O' course, we chapel folk don't hold with such ceremonials as Mary did, but I says I will. 'Twas the first and only time I ever been to a church service, and the rules did seem a thought cur'ous. Minister were quite a lad, a curat, and 'e come down in a white smock to the ' copper ' what was fixed behind the front door."

" We call it a font," I explained.

" Aye, I believe I 'ave heard that afore : well, the fount, then. Fust go off Master Curat wasn't for letting my dog Sly come in, though there wasn't above four or five folk inside, and plenty of room.

" ' God took and made her same as He done you, sir,' I says : ' and she serves Him same as you do, sir,' I says : ' only she'm better off in the number of legs.'

" ' I must put her into the porch,' he say.

" ' Please don't you lift a finger to her, sir,' I says, ' or maybe she'll fix it : 'tis a rum bitch, she is, is Sly.'

" She knowed as we was discussing 'er as well as well, and I see 'er lick and curl 'er lips : so I told 'er to go and lay at the doorway. So that was settled.

" Next, Mary Stimmers must go and get ' cast ' in 'er seat, and couldn't get up—weak in one leg she was : so I 'ad to go and set 'er on 'er feet, and then we made a fairy-ring around the fount.

" Now she'd took and telled me as we was suspected to do a bit o' back-answering with the gentleman, as we walked to the church. ' I ain't over-well up in it myself,' she say, ' but you'll find it all writ in the Book.' But being no scholard, when the time came I left the exact wording to 'er, and just touched me 'ead and said, ' Aye, aye, sir,' ' Same 'ere, sir,' and ' I'm with Mary Stimmers, sir,' as was only fair, seeing the baby belonged to 'er.

" But what I really *did* take notice of was a robin redbreast what was in the church, and what spended 'is time flitting back and fro between the preacher's dock and the fount : 'e seemed to me to be bent on a mischief, or anyhow to be there for a purpose : so I watch it careful, and sure enough when the minister took the nipper into 'is arms, and say to Mary : ' The name of this child ? ' master robin flut by and remembered 'isself right down the front of the baby's gown'd.

" Yet in face o' that Mary sings out : ' 'is name is 'Erbert.'

" ' No, pardon me on the other 'and, sir, 'is name is Robin,' I says.

" Minister looks from she to I, and from I to she, and seems lost.

" ' 'Erbert,' she say again.

" ' Robin,' I says.

" ' 'Erbert, an you please, sir,' she say a third time, and drops a curtsey. That looked like ending of it, for the curat took and dippit 'is 'and in the copper—fount, I would say, then. So I ups quick, and took the nipper out of 'is arms, and Sly, seein' some'at was a'foot, paddled in and looks up in me face for orders : and as the curat looked fudgetty, ' Guard 'im,' I says to Sly, lest 'e might give it all up and be off. And then leading Mary apart I says : ' You must ha' got a maggot in your 'ead, Mary Stimmers : he'm a lucksome bird is yon, as you well know ; and seein' as 'e was sent to mark the nipper, as 'e done, for a " Robin," 'tis flying in the face o' things for you to stick to " 'Erbert " : 'tis on-gainly for the future of 'im like enough, to take and cross the bird. You stick against it, and I'll 'ave nothing to do wi' the whole flummery ! 'Tis my first duty as god-sire to show you your error. There's only one thing we can do as neighbours— I'll go 'alves with you : take the fore-end o' mine and the back-end o' yours and make it " Robert,"

but that be as far as I dare : you can still call 'im " Bert " just the same you see.'

" So there we settled it, and ' Robert ' it were : and out again went Sly.

" At the end, the minister say we'm to take the nipper to the bishop when 'e can talk plain, and meantime 'e was to be instructed by Church Chastism. Mary she wasn't 'tending just then, so ' I'll see to it, sir,' I says, ' and if that don't do no good, a ash-plant and that is 'andy.' But 'e wasn't listening and walked off up the church to the waiting-room. I don't know what the church done, but I did my bit, though it wasn't a morsel o' use—lost she'p 'e was. O' course wi' such a start 'e couldn't come to much good, 'twasn't to be suspected : nor Mary nor I ain't seen 'im since 'e turned eighteen (that's over thirty years back-along) : must ha' been drownded in a sewer afore now, I reckon."

" How do you manage without a dog, Noldart ?" I asked by way of changing the subject.

" I doesn't," he answered, with a grin : " she'm close handy and watching of you I doubt. Beller ! " At the call, a heavy bob-tailed old English sheep-dog sprang into view from somewhere behind her master, and standing in front of him shook in every limb with excitement in anticipation of his orders.

" Smile pleasant, and look a lady, come," said Noldart: whereupon she dropped her ears and, wrinkling up her nose and lips, approached me and minutely investigated every inch of me from head to feet.

" Knows more than most, does Beller. If you was to touch my crook or coat, she'd 'old you. If I be away and leave 'er ' on guard ' the fold is safe as safe: not a she'p go out, or man or beast come in. ' Thiefs ' sends 'er capering round the hurdles, and she would kill or 'old anything she met."

" Yes, she is a great dear," I said, fondling Bella, with whom by this time I was on quite intimate terms: " where did you get her ? "

" Ah ! that be cur'ous—there's a 'istory 'taching to Beller; can't say she has a tail, can we, girl ? " (which caused the dog to smile again). " Three years ago come July, a man come buzzing along the road on a bee-circle: went by in a cloud o' dust 'e did, and some few minutes after, the dog come lopping along dead beat, and I says: ' 'Tis a shame, my girl,' and she lay down lost in the smither o' dust, on-able to move. Must a run miles I doubt. I fetched 'er my 'at-full o' water from a stream, and give 'er a crust o' bread from my pockert, and lifted 'er into the shade o' the ditch. ' Your bellers is

broke, my lady,' I says, ' if not your 'eart,' and she licked me 'ands and face to say, ' We'm understanding one another,' so I called 'er ' Beller ' (cause of 'er bellers) and there she is. Where she come from I dunno : where's she to, 'er owner don't know ; but where she'll live and die I *do* know, and so do she.

" Yes—they'm silly things comparisoned to dogs is the she'p, and therefore want more understanding than most : needs a lot o' patience to master their folly. And they gets sillier as they gets older, is my opinion. A lamb seems more senseful than a yeo—can at least play : when 'e's dropped that 'e's dropped all the sense 'e got seemingly. 'Tis the same with wummin, you know."

" Oh ! that is your experience as a married man, is it, Noldart ? "

" I never was married, sir : needed all me powers for the she'p. I never could abear to argufy with no one : I don't need to wi' she'p, I sends Beller. I'm wishing time and again, now I be middle-aged, as I 'ad took a wumman, but I give all me time to Farmer Trepplin, and 'ave worked on this farm for 'is father and 'im fifty-two year last Christmas. I telled 'im so a month agone, and asked if 'e could allow me a trifle to give up :

but 'e say 'No'—very close-woven man is Farmer Trepplin, real West of England cloth 'e is—and I must give up my cottage, 'e say, if I leave. That I couldn't, seeing as I 'ave lived in 'er over forty year, and lodged in 'er ten afore that.

" I near married once though—I'm not telling you who with 'cause you knows 'er: 'go and touch' that was, as they say, but we 'ad a fall out just in time—argufying as usual. She asked me to go for a walk with 'er one evening, and I called to fetch 'er.

" 'Better take a numbriller, 'tis going to rain,' I says.

" 'No, it ain't,' she say, 'and I shan't.'

" 'I 'Ave it your own way,' I says.

" 'No, I won't,' she say.

" 'We'll wait and see then,' I says.

" 'No, we won't,' she say: 'it ain't going to rain.'

" So I just stands and looks at her without a word.

" 'Can't yer say something or do something?' she went on. 'I say it ain't going to rain; now then?'

" 'Well,' I says, 'you won't 'ave it *my* way, nor yet your *own* way, nor even wait and see the *Lord's* way: what is there for I to say or do?'

" ' Bunches ! ' she say, ' and if you can't say something or do something we shan't suit.'

" ' Very well,' I says, and leaves 'er door, and goes off home.

" There you might suppose was the end, but not a bit of it. Ten minutes later she come down to my door, and 'twas raining then : and she say, ' You was wrong : 'twas not going to rain when you said 'twas : it comed on after.'

" ' 'Tis what I meant,' I says.

" ' No, you never,' she say : ' and 'tis not what I call rain even now—'tis but a smizzle. You say, " 'Tis going to rain " : you never say when, or for 'ow long, or 'ow 'ard and that—you never say nothing. If you'd a' said 'twill be going to rain, 'twould ha' been some sense to it. But you say, " 'Tis going to rain," and 'twasn't going to rain when you spoke it, and didn't rain for long after : and it ain't what I call rain now : 'tis but a smizzle. And you say, " Better take a numbriller " ; now a numbriller is for rain, and this be only a smizzle. There be rain and rain, same as there is men and men ; but there aren't numbrillers and numbrillers, but just a numbriller ; and a numbriller isn't for a smizzle, and you say " take a numbriller "—where's the sense in a numbriller for a smizzle ? Drat the man ! If you

can't say something or do something, you won't suit——' "

" ' Sam,' I says (that was my dog at that day)—' Sam, thiefs ! ' That cleared 'er, though Sam wasn't really in the 'ouse at all, being on duty in the she'p-fold. That was the end. If you go courting, seems to me you'm courting all sorts of things you'm not wanting."

CHAPTER III

JENNY RICKMAN'S GLEANINGS

IT was on a perfect afternoon in late September, when Nature begins to gather all her efforts in beauty made through spring and summer into the last gorgeous display of autumn that I found myself near Stoopers' Knapp. I felt that it was high time I called again on dear old Jenny Rickman and her husband. My last knock at their door had proved abortive, for it was answered by a duet from within—" Very, very sorry, but we'm terrible busy wi' our innards." Coupled with what I beheld in their backyard as I retired this cryptic saying was easily interpreted—they had killed their pig that morning.

On that particular September day I could plead more excuses than the weather, the exhilarating walk, and the pleasure I always find in a " tell " with Jenny, for calling on the old couple. I had a parcel of old-age spectacles of varied powers for her to pick from, as some months ago she told me that her own were failing her—" only fit for a new-born mole must just

put up wi' my own eyes wi'out no winders." And that old pair of shooting-boots might just as well be soled again by her husband, Bill, who is our village cobbler.

For a mile and more the short cut took me up through Silvercombe : and there, sitting on a log to take a " breather," I spent half an hour such as I love. A burn bubbled close beside me, and a water-vole was busy drawing grasses and berries from an overhanging rowan into its tunnelled chamber in the bank-side : while now and again it made extended journeys of twenty yards to secure tit-bits of crab-apple from under a neighbouring tree. Several times a squirrel passed with nuts, taking every care that none should see his growing larder. Summer play was drawing to a close : it was time to hurry up and stock the storehouse full. A change was coming when he could only live upon the labours of the past.

As I sat in silence a curious and pathetic thing happened. Outcast from the swarms who gambolled at their games some distance from me, an old rabbit picked its laboured way along the turf. It got within a yard of me and stopped. A thing of mere skin and bones, it sat and stared up at me with sightless eyes. I passed my hand quite close before its nose, but even its sense of smell seemed dead. But I could see its trouble. Through loss

of sight it had failed to find the bark and stumps, to gnaw which serve to keep the teeth in trim, with the result that at last they were so long and overgrown that it could not even nibble, and was in the final stages of starvation. Stretching itself at full length in the sun, was it dreaming of many duties done? Of dangers successfully escaped, or of former frolics? At least the sun was comforting and warm.

Stoopers consists of a tiny hamlet of seven cottages which look as if they had been caught in a blizzard and thrown down in a heap into a little niche on the side of a hill. They seem to sit there half-stunned, with an air of resignation, determined to make the best of their remote surroundings. For Stoopers lies four miles from Hawkescombe and two from its own parish church, which (if he went anywhere) Bill Rickman attended. But far away as they are, the villagers are still my neighbours, and I have seen much of Jenny.

Rickman is ever to be observed sitting on the bench in his bow-window, at work behind a fly-blown notice of his trade hanging on a boot-lace. Nature from the first was not over-kind to Bill, and sixty-five years of change and chance have but increased his limitations. He limped

into the world with one leg shorter than the other, and this, perchance, has served in part to dwarf his general development. Again, when a boy, while tightening his shoe-lace with a carving fork, one prong of which proved unequal to the strain, he destroyed the sight of his left eye: hence the eternal green patch which marks its grave. The other, which is always weak, mourns its neighbour with unceasing tears, and, from the angle at which they sit upon his nose, one doubts whether it gets much assistance from the horn-rimmed "specs" he wears. Though under no vows—so far as history shows—a razor has never come upon his chin. The beard he wears is sparse if virginal, and it is only on Bank Holidays and Fair Days that Jenny takes the scissors to his hair.

Often enough the Snob is rival of the Publican for honours as political oracle in a village. But here is an exception: Rickman is our poet rather than our statesman. He assures me that he always thinks in verse, and certainly whenever possible he rhymes his sentences, and even the items in his bills. And if these halt uncertainly, pray of your charity to recollect the leg and eye, and wonder not that he is known by intimates as "Rickety Bill."

Here is the advertisement hanging in his window :—

W. RICKMAN

Bootmaker.

Repairs in best leather
Tie each pair together.

———

MINERAL WATERS sold here
One penny per bottle.

(Messrs. HANNAY & WICKS)
Ninepence for six.

NOTICE.—There will be none
Till War is done.

His cryptic explanation to me as regards refreshments and prices ran :—

" We cannot be cleared out of stock at one go
The job as we'm at when supplies do run low."

When I reached the cottage, Rickety's window knew him not, and as I raised the latch of the door I found Jenny sitting on the high-backed oak settle by the open hearth, picking over a lapful of spagnum moss for padding hospital splints. A touching picture she made as the firelight danced on her old Paisley shawl and spotless white cap whose frilled edges framed the wrinkled

face—a face of greater strength of character, perhaps, than beauty.

A smile of genuine delight and welcome hailed me as I closed the door, and sat down beside her. But somehow she seemed more shrunk and fragile than usual, and the voice was thin in which she asked me :

" And 'ow be the Germin war to-day, sir ? And 'ave the Armitix arrived in England ? "

You see, the postman is known to bring a paper to the Manor—nay, " one every day o' the week " —which satisfies our neighbours that Hawkescombe is in close touch with England, and that all is well. Jenny continued :

" They'm tellin' me as Liza Bennett's man been badly 'andled and lays in 'ospital in a Island in France. Shame it is—so 'tis. Liza, 'er left the postcard on our mantelshelf, and wants to start out there at once. But I telled 'er 'tis madness, and wi' a cup o' tea and that I quieted 'er down a point or two—so I did."

On reaching down the postcard I found it headed " Military Hospital, Carlisle," and was at some pains to explain Bennett's whereabouts to Jenny.

" Ah, well ! " she said, when she grasped it all, " we knowed yer see as 'e were in France, and so must 'a gotten 'is knock out there : so we took

it, Carl bein' quite a furrin name, too, as it must be somewheres out o' England. Anyhow, 'tis comfortsome to know 'e'm beyond their sticks for a bit, so 'tis. But 'twould seem we'm all gettin' scattered: for I do 'ear as Em'ly 'Arding's eldest son, what lives down to Cornwall, was bitted by a nasty 'ydropathic dog last week, and they've took and sent 'im out to the Pastors Destitute in Paris. Pray the Lord 'e comes out righted.

" And that's not the worst, neither. Eli Sayers (what lives next to widow Reeves down in the bottom) came 'ome last Saturday night a bit brisk, lost the way to 'is door, and spent the night in the widder's fowl 'ouse. Fourteen 'ens was so mazed they 'ung theirselves wi' their 'eads through the wire-nettin' o' the run, and in 'is takings Eli must pluck the old tom clean o' feathers save the 'ackles, and left 'im such a photer not one o' the other nine 'ens 'asn't done nothin' since but race the woods, and won't come near the roost."

And thus we gossiped on a bit, and I told her of the boots I wanted Bill to mend. But all the spectacles, alas, proved failures. As I was just rising to leave, Jenny laid a detaining hand upon my knee and said in pleading tones:

" *Do* be pleased to set a while longer, sir. 'Tis

lonesome like when Bill be flittin' out all day for the l'ather. I'd like to be talkin' to-night to ye all about myself. Come last three days, I been livin' and thrashin' through all me young times over again; 'tis a sure sign me account be nearin'."

And folding her hands together upon the moss cushion in her lap, Jenny fixed her eyes upon the glowing embers of the fire, which seemed to warm to life again that past which lay unrolled like a map before her. And though she only marked for me in speech the higher peaks and cross-roads, her long and frequent pauses were full of vivid colour, and eloquent of valleys too deep and sacred for mere words.

"I'm 'ardly knowin' mother what she'm like, 'er dies when I strike four and Susan's nine. We sisters does for father years and years till Susie says she tires of the cookin', and the washin', and the mendin', and the dullness and what not, and must go to service: go to see the world—and I bides 'ome. 'Tis 'ard, so 'tis. But some'ow Jenny never matters—not to say matters, then: can't dance at 'arvest 'omes, and Fair-day, and that, and she don't mind; must just bide 'ome and glean, so Susan say. . . .

"Father, 'e'm a thatcher, and I'm thirteen or thereabouts when 'e took 'im the consumptions.

Terrible piece o' work I 'as wi' 'im, day and night, night and day, and me not strong—never was. Five years 'e lays and coughs, and two years a'bed, and fades and fades to a piece o' muslin afore 'e dies. But Susan she'm not comin'—never comes. And now the funeral . . .

" Thomas Arlidge comes a-courtin' o' me. I'm takin' up wi' Tom. The cottage be me own, and 'e'm takin' good wages as a carter. Steady, too, and oh ! that strong. Well growed and as good as 'e'm big is Tom. I loves 'im—so I do. The walks we'm avin' together of an evening, and the presents as 'e'm bringin'. We'm fixin' up the day, 'is birthday comes just right, the day afore me own ; 'twill serve proper—so 'twill. I'm paperin' both me rooms. I got me a blue dress . . .

" Susan and the man what she married up to Bristol (too young she were to a' took and done it) they must needs get 'em into a railroad accident (last week it were, it seems) and is both killed together. And oh ! my dear, they leaves three little 'uns—Fred, and Mary, and Lizzie—oldest only five. I can't do other than take to 'em, can I ? There ain't no one else, not one. Might 'a been me own, too. I feels as Susan's lookin' at me to take 'em ; 'tis me duty, so 'tis : gleanin's. . . .

" So the fightin' starts. Thomas is took noddin' about the little 'uns. Can't stomach 'em. Says I must take and choose betwixt them and 'im, and please meself. Please! Oh! my dear, if 'e only knowed. 'E can't wait neither. 'E isn't waitin', but marries Katie Truscott, so 'e do. Can't really blame 'im, not to say blame then—no, I don't, never did, but . . .

" We'm managin' some fashion. All the children they'm strong and 'ealthy, but Lor'! to see 'em eat. Thank God, I'm not wantin' much meself, and I'm contrivin'. Master Busk, the keeper, throws us in a faggot at the door most weeks as 'e'm passin', and now and then a rabbit wi' it. The shop lets me 'ave all we'm wantin' so long as I keeps a pig in the old stye against the count. Me cider-apples fetches me a tidy bit. Aunt Maggie dies up to Windsor town and leaves me a very 'andy lill' piece o' money. I'm sellin' me old bits o' pewter off the dresser—through the postman I'm doin' it. Every day I'm workin' in the fields. 'Ay and 'arvest money extra, too. And the neighbours, they'm just beautiful. Not one kills a pig but we must 'ave a bite, and the butter, and the eggs, and the old bits of clothes they'm givin' us, no one wouldn't never believe. And oh! the farmers, they'm good, leavin' us such corners in the fields all uncut, and spillin'

such a shower off the rakes—I see 'em missin' a lot for the purpose. But wi' all the gleanin's, the children be just as much as I can carry up the 'ill—just as much . . .

" Mary and Lizzie they'm gone out to service, good places, too, for both of 'em. Fred's cowman to Farmer Transome, and wi' 'is wages things is lighter . . .

" But I'm missin' Fred terrible when 'e goes down country for a better place—so I be. The cottage be so lonesome, days is so long, and no one to work for; and I longs for the smell o' the children back again. . . .

" Bill Rickman's mother died last week and leaves 'im alone, poor feller. Will I offer to take 'im for a lodger? Would be neighbourly and that. 'E weren't never strong—never what you might call clever in the 'ead—patchy—like a gammon cured too quick. And there's 'is leg, too. . . .

" To-day I 'as the chance to go up London way and make me 'ome along o' cousin Charlotte. But I'm feelin' I can't be leavin' the old cottage. Never knowed but this for 'ome. Beside, I never been no traveller—not to say traveller, then."

And then Jenny awoke from living her own drama over again, and, raising her eyes to mine, became the conscious story-teller of the past.

" You see, sir, I never 'ad no ankils : they was both informed from birth—another link 'twixt Bill and me. I once went down so far as Hawkescombe town, when father was buried. What a sight o' folks there was there, too. And once we 'ad a carrier started (but 'e misfortunately lost 'is mare, foalin' she was, and give it up), and I were persuaded to take me a journey into market. But there! I were frighted to death at the maze o' folks reelin' and roamin' to and fro, and I set me in the waggon in the yard o' the public where 'e put up, wi' a numbriller over me eyes all day till we started 'ome again—so I did. Never again, I says : and I never 'ave agained. Them be the only twice-times I been above a couple o' mile from me cottage since father went. And they'm tellin' me as it be worse where me cousin Charlotte be to—Sowshark, I think they calls it—bigger and more flurry-some like. I wouldn't venture, not if the Vicar of London 'isself come to fetch me in a gig. And as for the trains! I never seen one, and never want to—that I don't—no, I don't! "

And once again her eyes dropped to the fire and the past became the present.

" I'm lodgin' William Rickman. Year in, year out, 'e bides wi' me. But I'm not 'avin' any life —not to say life, then. Gleanin's! And now we'm

makin' up our minds to get us married. 'E'm gone thirty-six, and I'm in me fifty-five. And there be this to it: 'e'm the only maker as can really fit me wi' the boots. I were tellin' 'im of it as we set us over the fire last night, and 'e say they must be fitted on the spot, and by one as takes a real interest in me ankils—like 'e'm doin'. On the t'other side, I'm the only one (so 'e say, then) as makes 'is breeches fit 'is seat. 'I can set flat in yours all day, Jenny,' 'e say, 'wi'out no galls nor ribses.' So we takes and fixes it. Down to Lufton Regis we 'as to journey to the church in farmer Buckley's milk-cart; and a pretty ride it is—so 'tis. And the mare casts a shoe just as we gets us 'ome, and we nails it up over the door for luck. . . .

"We'm quite 'appy—though nothin' to be frightened about. A good man Bill is to me, so 'e be. The poutry be a thought dullish times, and Bill isn't pickin' up much news outside. But what's that? The only thing I troubles over be that I never can't learn 'im no prayers—not to say prayers, then. To please 'im they must rhyme, and *I* can't make 'em do it, and when *'e* does they seem growed out o' prayers—like a man in socks and a binder, then. So I learns 'im 'ymns: 'e thinks a power o' them, and they must serve. . . .

"Bill say 'e's not dejectin', and as I got little

doin' all day, we takes and adapts a lone child from the poor-'ouse. Seven 'Arry be, and such a lad. Such manners to 'im, and such a 'ead-piece : can read, and write, and sing most anythin'. And don't 'e love me—more'n anyone I ever knowed. 'Tis a gleanin' worth a set o' staddles to itself—so 'tis. Eight years we 'ad 'im, as beautiful a time as ever mother 'ad : thank God for it—so I do. . . .

" 'Arry's growin' big, and Bill's allus a bit unknowin' wi' the young folks. So 'Arry takes 'im a place down to Williton as garden-boy. But 'e writes me every week or two, year in, year out, and comes up now and again to see us. Of a Sunday we'm 'avin' such teas together—chudleighs, and cut-rounds, and that—and then Bill 'e'm sayin' us some poutry. . . .

" To-day 'Arry be up again, and oh ! my dear, 'e say 'e'm goin' listin' for a soldier. 'E offs to-morrow mornin' as ever is. It give me such a turn. I'm just a frame wi'out a belly. But 'tis duty, and what be I but mother to 'im ?

" ' Good son,' I'm sayin'. ' God bless y', you'm the one 'e loves. Go and do a lot at them Germins, and remember mother's allus wi' y'—allus—allus ! I'm right proud o' y', 'Arry lad—so I be. Just reach us down the Book.'

" I'm readin' 'im the story of lill' David and that

old Go-liar. And now we'm sayin' ' Our Father ' both together. . . . Ain't the room got terrible warm, sir ? P'raps you'd be so kind as to ope the door a foot."

In doing it I gave poor Jenny ample time to wipe away all traces of the tears which had started raining down on the moss. I felt that her story was done—at least, brought down to a point from which I knew the rest.

" Wi' that, and a box o' pills, I done all I could for my 'Arry—off me knees then you understand. But 'e were shot—you'm knowin' that—shot dead, thank God. 'Arry were my last gleanin', and I dropit 'im afore I got me 'ome, so now I've took to the moss. And if so be as you'm called on to start re-suitin' for the army, sir, don't y' take my Bill. 'Tisn't I'm a coward, but 'e really bain't fit for travellin', and they wouldn't be understandin' 'is rhythms, and risms, and goin's on. But you'll be lettin' 'im mend your shoes—leastways just the eldest ones ? 'Ow dark it gets : you should be movin' 'ome, sir, the long dark way you got to go too, and me keepin' of y' so long. I only pray me ankils last me out me journey . . . but I wants your blessin' same as allus, sir. May I ? I never wasn't strong—not to say strong, then."

" Ah ! Jenny. You carry such a splendid

sheaf of gleanings, and your journey is so nearly done—it's I would have your blessing too."

And as I knelt there at her side she placed a trembling hand upon my own, whence I guided it to my head. There was a little silence, but at last I caught her words—" and keep us stronger, and stronger, and stronger ! "

And oh ! the look of radiant peace upon her face.

There's the shuffle of Rickety's feet upon the pitchings.

Outside, the harvest moon was at the full, and lighted me home to Hawkescombe, but when she set, she took Jenny with her on her breast.

CHAPTER IV

SAM BARTER, CHURCHWARDEN

I STOOD in Owlhayes farmyard among a seething mass of life—cows, ponies, pigs, chickens and dogs, and said " Good morning " to Mr. Samuel Barter, a very remarkable person. The youngest of six brothers, who are all over six feet in height, his height is six-feet-five. In his younger days he was a typical hillman of the West of England, noted far and wide for his enormous muscular development, and his excellence in all trials of strength popular at fairs and on market days in the West country forty years ago. But time and several severe illnesses have greatly reduced him : at sixty-six his thews and sinews, though still formidable, are not what they were. His handshake, however, still remains an experience for those who greet him. His voice is as notable as his grip ; uncertain in inflection, its quavering, high pitch, coming from such an immense chest and throat, lends an added humour to his droll conversation. He has a fine head, and a well-moulded, good-featured face, which is

somewhat obscured by a heavy, grey beard. To-day Sam is not as erect as he was, his head is not carried with its former dignity : his eye has lost much of its lustre, and if his farming flourishes (his holding has been tenanted by one of his name for five generations without a break), I fear the profits only minister to his besetting trouble—cider. Sam's own particular is not the ordinary brew, but a treble-distilled essence known as cider-wine, strong enough to lift the scalp of the uninitiated, a bottle of which may always be seen peeping out of his ample coat pocket. I am very fond of Sam, but I fear . . .

" Good mornin' to you, sir," said Sam cordially. " Please to step inside and take a drop of something."

" Thank you very much, Mr. Barter," said I, " but I must not stop, as I have much to do this morning. What I came for is to ask permission to make free of your meadows for studying bird life. I will be very careful of the crops, and do no damage."

" Go where you please, sir, and when you please, and welcome, but just step inside five minutes. I be sorry, but missus she be washing."

" Do you know, Mr. Barter, that I have never yet had the pleasure of meeting your good wife ? "

And Sam fixed me with a bleary, incredulous eye.

" Never met—don't know my missus ? What ! Not know the woman with half a face ? Shroud me ! Here, Matilda ! (She'm a wee bit saucy washin' days, is Matilda.) Matilda ! "

Mrs. Barter stepped forth from a steaming outhouse, and I understood. Poor thing ! A large " port wine " mark divided her face exactly into halves.

After a few minutes' chat I said I must be moving, and as Sam was going my way we set out together.

" So I hear you have got your new Rector, Mr. Barter. I hope things will be happier in the parish now. You must do your best as churchwarden to help him in every possible way, you know."

" Well, sir, he'm a nice spoken sort of a man. 'Ad quite a friendly tell with him in the vestry after service last Sunday, and I give him a hearty welcome. ' I hope we shall be great friends, Mr. Churchwarden, and work together for the common good,' he say, and I think it must 'ave come out of a book by the way 'e said it, ' 'Owever —as for friends, I hope so with all my 'eart,' I says, ' but we'll winter ye and summer ye afore we says too much to that. And don't you be in

too great an 'urry after the common good, till you know what it be,' I says. ' The common good be largely works, and with them the rest will come all in good time. Last parson 'e 'oped to be friends, too, but under a month 'e treated we like a forkful o' droppin's. He was fly enough in the pulpit, always tryin' to make our sins " jump out of us " as 'e said, but I telled 'im once in this very room, ' Parson,' I says, ' we'm your sheep, but you don't come near us in the week, so we do remain verminful Sundays, and you can't make ticks skip.'

" Then again, last Palm Sunday, without a word to anyone 'e give out as the offertory Easter Day would be given to the Rector, and when I tells 'im on the quiet as this was a new thing and the churchwardens should 'ave been consulted, he was took frisky about it, so I says I should not be collectin' at all. He got Bill Berry—the " widder," as we calls 'im—(what's got a widder mother, that is)—to take the nose-bag, and after service I counted it out on this very table, and bids 'im welcome to the bellyful of wind it was —threepence halfpenny, a peppermint drop, and a boot pertecter.

" But I touched the hollow of his thigh (as you might say) at the jumble sale. He was for sellin' a pair of black trousers to my niece, Mrs.

Garland. ' Hold 'em up to the light,' I says to her. ' There be a hole in the sittin' bit o' they. I see 'em split abroad when his reverence picked up a pin off the vestry floor Sunday week.' She did, and we found it were mended on the inside with a bit of black stickin' plaster. ' 'Tain't honest,' I says. ' Mr. Barter,' he says, ' you'm drunk.' ' Maybe,' I says, ' but not as tight as your breeches. Us don't grow nothin' for tail-holes on we.' From that day he was took broody, but all his eggs must a been addled, for within a month he'd resignated.

" 'Well, farmer,' the new Rector say when I done, ' you 'ave give me a deal to think over and digest for my supper to-night. I think you may be said to 'ave dealt a trifle brisk wi' one another, and o' course I've only 'eard one side o' the story, and am scarcely in a position to judge.'

" ' You'm never like to 'ear no other, sir,' I says. ' And as for judgin', there's no call—'e judged 'isself and pleaded guilty when 'e 'opped off 'is perch. We'em plain folks, plain lookin', plain thinkin', plain spoken, plain doin', but our 'earts' strong and we'm sound in the wind if you listen to it through the Lord's telescope—human nature. 'Tis the best ready reckoner ever made ; carry 'im in y'ur pocket and 'e'll tell ye more nor any o' y'ur books. But we fidgets

on a curb and a bearin' rein, and kicks at a whip. Light 'ands does it all the way 'ome.'

" And I said 'im good night, and we outed by different doors.

" But I felt 'twas a stiffish handicap lettin' the trousers into secrets and givin' no encouragement to the skirts. Like Solomon, I be in favour of 'alves when there's a double claim. And I hadn't left the vestry twenty paces from my tell wi' the new man afore I trips against 'is rib. Introducin's wasn't needed, for what between 'er umbrella inside-outin' in the wind and a shred of orange peel in 'er road, I found 'er turned turtle, way-layin' me on the asphalt path and claimin' from me to give 'er a lift on to 'er feet, same as I just done 'er master.

" ' A friend in need, Mr. Barter,' she say as I righted 'er, ' is a friend indeed. Deeds and not words is my own motto through life.'

" ' We'em thankful to know that,' I says, ' for we 'ave found in the past as the deeds gets mostly drowned in a flood of explainin's.'

" ' Oh ! ' she runs on, ' but I have a winter programme for the village already sketched out which I feel sure will meet with your warm approval and the co-operation of your wife : indeed I 'ave taken the liberty of sendin' 'er a copy and hope to call and discuss it at length

with her this week, so please ask 'er to 'ave suggestions ready for me. I am most anxious for our people to have every day occupied with really useful and unselfish work, huntin' after those things which really matter. Anythin' which tends to make their dull lives Busy and Bright, both with big B's——'

"'Steady, ma'am—steady, steady,' I says. 'Just stop a minute and breathe, or you'll be ridin' over the 'ounds. The season's early, you mind, and your fences is blind. There's wire and water in plenty in this parish and the goin' be often-times wonderful heavy. You must learn your new country afore you publish your meets, and even then you'll be gettin' no runs if you don't know where to stop the earths. Now me and my Matilda 'ad a thrash over your programme only as late as last night. There's your perigraph about "Cosy Chats on Missions." Now I don't pertend to know who Miss Zenana was, but I do know as there's many livin' 'ere which if they ain't got Bible names needs washin' and clothin' and feedin' afore they can see the difference a'tween theirselves and them black brethren, or take any interest in the makin' of foreigners decent.'

"'But, Mr. Barter,' she chips in, 'as Christians

we 'ave our marchin' orders : you must remember the command——'

" ' Right, ma'am, right you are,' I says, ' and marchin' means drillin' at 'ome first, or they'll be fallin' out with feet fever for sure. Then there's a deal about Mothers' Meetin's to make shifts and such-like for them abroad. Now I understand from Matilda as she's seen at them meetin's more fingers pricked wi' gossip than wi' needles, and more yards of reputation cut up and spoiled than was ever gathered in the sewin' o' calico petticoats. Show 'em 'ow to make and mend their own bits o' things for their 'omes first—the question is, can you do it ? '

" ' I should 'ope so, Mr. Barter,' she say. ' I do all my husband's mendin' myself.'

" ' Then I'm doubtin', I says ; ' for my niece what did your wash last week says the darnin' o' your man's socks must ha' been done wi' a pitchin'-fork, such a piece of work as it was : a lump like a rook's nest on the heel o' one, she say. And I 'eard 'er bet Matilda a sittin' o' duck's eggs to a row o' pins as 'e'll limp up the pulpit stairs under a month. You'm quite likely laughin' at me in the tent door, as I might say, but you've no need to, for they tells me you'm blessed wi' five children. Now see, you can't giddy about at all these meetin's and at the same time play

fair by them brats. Your eldest lad 'ad a pocketful o' my Blenheims last evenin'—the only tree o' them apples in the whole orchard—and him not been in the parish a week. Look to that now ! '

" ' Boys will be boys, Mr. Barter,' she say, ' though I'm more than shocked—'

" ' No, no,' I says. ' I'm not blamin' 'im for spottin' the tree and havin' 'em—shows 'is good sense, I telled 'im so. What I banged 'is ears for was for lettin' me catch 'im. He'd be twice as sharp if you took and trained 'im, and he's worth it, for I seen 'im flippin' the pips at the Apostles in the south window durin' the sermon this very evenin', and 'e made a bull of Luke twice to my certain knowledge. He'll do you more credit than any o' these Parish Converse-sat-downies as you talks about—palaverin's and spittle-splittin's I calls 'em. Be you supposin' your new parishioners ain't Busy already wi' a big B ? What price Mrs. Grieg what's got fifteen joints to 'er tail to date, and likely more to come ? It takes some sewin' makin' figleaves for fifteen and keepin' 'em mended. Show 'er 'ow to do it. Big B's, eh ? They got it bad already, and 'tis Blight, the blight o' Bills and Bogs and Bothers what blasts their Bile and makes them Dull wi' a big D. Teach 'em to look at 'ome first, and show 'em how to 'elp theirselves—to Brighten

their Bellies wi' Bread and Butter, and Bacon and Beef; to Brighten their Babies with Boots and Breeches, and Bonnets and Bibs; to Brighten their Barracks wi' Beds and Blankets, and Besoms and Baths; wi'——Well, I don't know o' much else beginnin' wi' a Big B, 'cept Baccy and Beer and maybe you wouldn't be doin' much in them. But if we gets on to the next letter o' the alphabet, C . . . ' but when I looked down for 'er she'd gone—which was a pity, as I 'ad already thought o' several big C's.

" So you see, sir," Sam concluded, " I done all I could to make the new folks comfortable, and put 'em in the way o' things like."

As I went away I felt sure that Sam was a man of parts, but it was only some months later that I found out what other parts he could play. It happened one evening that I was passing the school at Combe St. Ambrose when Miss Blake, the schoolmistress, spoke to me.

" If you could very kindly spare five minutes, sir, I should be so grateful if you would step into the class-room."

" Of course I will, but what is the trouble, Miss Blake ? "

" It's only Mr. Barter, sir. He just needs a little advice and a cheery word in the infant's class-room."

I little guessed what was in store for me. Upon the floor sat my friend the churchwarden, covered from head to foot in a mustard-coloured horse-rug, chewing the end of his beard—the very incarnation of abject despair. At his side, but seated on a desk, was his fellow-warden, Mr. Wallace, overseer at the Manor Farm.

"Thanks be," quoth Mr. Barter, evidently much relieved at my entrance. "You'm the very gentleman we'm wantin' to put us through our paces. Now Wallace, look spry and tell 'im what this 'ere tablet do signify."

From Mr. Wallace I gathered that an entertainment which had been organised by the schoolmistress and a few other ardent spirits was to be given the very next evening on behalf of the *Waifs and Strays' Society*, and the churchwardens, much against their will, had been pressed into providing a turn in some "Tableaux Vivants."

"'Tis a bit o' humour they'm after," explained Sam from under his rug on the floor, "and it appears to me they'll 'ave it, seein' how they 'ave a started to deck me out. I understand there's to be no speakin' done, else they might get more than they bargained for—me in such a scuttery as they've a sewed together!"

"Oh, well, that is half the fun, Barter," I said,

trying my best to soothe him. " But what is the subject to be represented ? "

" 'Tis called ' The Babes in the 'Ood,' or some such silliness, and 'tis in two picturs. First, the babies do go to sleep as babies ; and second, they do wake up after years and years, and 'ave of course growed out o' their clothes, and that's where the fun is to be, seemin'ly, and this 'ere be the 'hearsal."

" Ah, I see," said I. " Are you dressed for your part ? "

" In a way o' speakin', but Wallace's rig-out ain't finished, so 'e be drillin' in mufti, as you might say."

" So I see, but are both scenes to be gone through to-night ? "

" Bless you, yes, sir. The sleepin' business in the first tablet is took by two kids of Mrs. Reed's, what lives down to Haccombe Bottom. The 'ood be pictured by some green curtains as much like a 'ood as you be. And the robin, what spreads the leaves over 'em, is took by young Harry Luster in a red chemise wi' a feather dustin' broom stuck out be'ind. Lor ! what a figure of a bird 'e do look to be sure ! He been spreadin' leaves on the stage three-quarters of an hour good this very afternoon, till I took and stoppit the rubbish, and sent 'em all 'ome to bed. We can flamm

through the second pictur for which we'm responsible without they peepin' about."

" Very well," said I. " Let us go into the school, and I will coach you. I suppose you are the grown-up prince, Barter, and Mr. Wallace——"

" The shoe's on t'other foot, sir. Wallace, 'e be the Seraph, and I be the she Cherubim, worse luck. Me !—six foot five in me socks ! 'Tis unbelievable ! ' Enter into the spirit o' the thing,' they do keep sayin' to me. I be entered a fortnight ago and more. Howsoever, I don't feel one whit like that she princess ! "

It was only with great difficulty that I restrained unseemly laughter.

" But how about your beard, man ? "

" Oh ! I 'ides 'er under a mast, sir."

" Very good ; come on when you are ready, and pose yourselves as you think most natural, and when you say ' Ready ' I will draw the curtains and then criticise the effect."

Presently I heard a stentorian ' Ready ! ' and pulled the string. For several moments I was held speechless. If humour was the goal in view, they had indeed attained it. There stood Sam at rigid " attention " in a " cherub's " mask, with a mane of golden hair flowing down his back, while, from under the mask, horns of grey beard protruded, like tusks, for at least a couple

of inches. The upper part of his huge body was entirely smothered with dead leaves sewn on some slight foundation. Dangling from a length of string round his neck was a gigantic "baby comforter," presumably as connecting link with the previous tableau. A ballet dancer's skirt of muslin, gauze, and tinsel reached half-way to his knees, and stood out like the leaves of an immense water-lily. Beneath it hung down his own blue cotton shirt. His legs were encased in thin combinations, supposed to conceal his too obviously masculine limbs, which terminated in a pair of white socks and black goloshes with silver-paper buckles. Upon his hands he wore a pair of open-work mittens. Sam's agony was such that he had to express it.

"Whist me! Was ever sane man made to look such a gudgeon, sir?"

"Hush, hush!" said I. "Remember, you must not speak a word. Now just listen and do as I tell you."

But his shame made Barter garrulous.

"How do the bust of me figure out, sir? I drawed the line at stays, 'cause my breathin' ain't what it was."

"Wait a moment now and let me see——"

"Which leg frames the best to your way o'

thinkin', sir? Wallace, he took and shaved the right one a bit, but he nigh ham-stringed me doin' of it, so we left t'other"; which, indeed, was obvious, large black bristles, like those of a gorilla, pushing their way through the combinations.

"We will arrange that presently. Just now I want——"

"You *can't* arrange them hairs, sir. That's just where it is: they drags up and comes through as you pull the blasted things on. They must be as they be, or shaved like the other, and that I never——"

"They will do very nicely, Barter. Now place your left foot a bit forward."

"The Almighty 'ave forbid it, sir. These 'ere compilations would split in the fork they be that rotten. It all come of Miss Blake washin' of 'em in Condor's Fluid for to get the skin colour."

"Then turn round slightly to your right," I suggested.

"Not likely, either. This 'ere ruffle don't finish off well be'ind—wasn't enough gathers to go round, I understand—so I was perticlar warned to present a bold front, and nothin' more. Take a peep and see, Mr. Wallace, you'm doin' nothin'. It don't reach, do it? I thought as

much. And didn't I ought to 'ave a girdel or some'at round me belly, sir ? "

" If you could only keep quiet for two minutes——"

But it was no use. The princess began a furious argument with her hands.

" Couldn't I moult these mitts, or ear-caps, or whatever they do represent ? Superflus without flies, and is all agin the circulation."

" Yes," said I. " They will make no difference."

" 'Twill to me, though." And with two rents the mittens lay dead upon the floor. " And I should feel a thought steadier, not so defenceless then, with a shepherd's crook or even a parasol in me 'and—or have we overslept such-like vanities ?—though we won't be allowed to throw anything, I suppose, if the audience do get took up-rearious ? "

" Course not ! " exclaimed Mr. Wallace. " We'm only picturs—still life—dead like."

" Wish I was ! Wallace, you been dustin' your meaders wi' artificial I can tell. I sniffs it wonderful strong. Don't you go and leave any on my 'air when you puts your arm round my withers."

" Now, gentlemen, what I would suggest——"

" There's to be soft music durin' the scene,

I understand," broke in Mr. Wallace. " Concertina or two mouth organs, but I ain't 'eard the tune."

" Dead March for Samuel, I suggest," replied Barter, " and don't you get too lively with your feet. They'm neighbourly to my corns, remember—stand over a bit, that's better. Where be I to fix my eyes, sir ? Daresn't look at the congregation."

" Oh, on Mr. Wallace, the prince, of course."

" 'Tis a giddy prospect whatever—a fairy scene and no error."

" Now, prince, go close to the princess, and put your right arm round her waist—yes, a little closer still."

" 'Ere ! " exclaimed Wallace, " take and tuck your whisker in under the mast—it tickles my cheek."

" You be blowed," replied the princess. " What's a trifle of tickle compared to what I be sufferin' ? "

Obviously Mr. Barter was getting to the extreme end of his tether, so I hastened to approve the pose.

" That is excellent," I said. " It couldn't be better. Now keep quite still one moment——"

" Don't press that teat affair agin me, Mr. Wallace. You've no morsel o' sense. It 'ave a

sharp bone lip to it . . ." But he was here rudely interrupted by a loud report, and in a moment the peace of the scene was transformed into pandemonium. Barter was raging like a bull.

"What has happened now?" I asked. "Steady, Sam, steady, man——"

"Damn you for a clumsy bullock, Wallace. You knowed as them paps wasn't strong, and now my left breast's torpedoed. They was done with air-balls, and I be all o' one side now, and no shape whatever." And he fled the stage.

By the time I reached the green-room the pink combinations were in shreds, and Mr. Barter was capering about in a blue cotton shirt open at the chest, where a large blue patch showed plainly that the torpedo had gone home. He was inarticulate with fury; indeed, the only printable observation upon which he ventured ere we parted was: "Waifs and Strays to the life this is, but dratted if I knows which I be!"

I never heard how the performance proper was ultimately rendered or received. I rather fancy the "air-ball" was not the only thing that exploded.

CHAPTER V

THE MILKY WAY

WOODLEIGH FARM is a holding of twenty-eight acres of picturesque and secluded meadows climbing down the south slope of a steep hill, at whose foot, through a spinney, runs a merry burn. The homestead stands on its bank. Here live Mr. and Mrs. Keitch. Levi is a man past middle age, of medium height, with a shaggy, moth-eaten beard, and a head of tousled hair streaked with grey. He has an unintelligent, vacant face, with dull, bleared eyes, and is loose-limbed and uncertain in every movement, slow and halting of speech. His head is for ever crowned with a hard felt hat perpetually dented in at the top and green with age, and his shambling legs are gaitered in box-cloth leggings, once fawn-coloured.

In everything his very opposite, his wife, Keziah, is sharp, energetic, and sprightly in manner, her apron always spotless, and her constant curtsey almost embarrassing. Her hair is smoothed flat and even as the paint on a Dutch

doll, and her face is of a bright complexion to match. When surprised or interested, she has a habit of throwing up her arms dramatically to heaven, and letting them descend into her lap with a flop.

This couple have done their duty by the State nobly, their union being blessed with fourteen hale children.

I called one hot and thirsty afternoon at their farm for a glass of milk. When the door was opened I saw the husband sitting in the chimney-corner, shaking like a leaf, while the wife, standing with the handle of the door in one hand, dried her eyes in the corner of her apron with the other, and for some moments continued to curtsey at intervals. Obviously the peace of their home had been stirred to its depths, and I therefore apologised for disturbing them, and begged to withdraw.

"No, sir, please, sir, please come you in and take a seat," implored Keziah. "We'm in a terrible rout 'tis true, but if I may make so bold it's like this, sir——"

She brought forward a chair while she was speaking and beckoned me to it. As I crossed the room I saw that the pale-faced, horror-stricken man over the fire was in a condition of fear bordering on imbecility: his eyes rolled his

limbs twitched, and it was plain that cider or some disaster had reduced his nerves to a " diddering " jelly.

" It's like this, sir," continued Keziah. " Our Joe 'as been and cut 'is finger, you see. With a hook 'e done it, furze choppin' on the common——"

" Cut 'is finger ! " broke in the husband in a hoarse tremolo, waving his arms in a fashion little short of lunacy. " Cut 'is finger ! Cut it ! ! . . . Cut it ! ! ! O, my golly ! Why don't you say pricked it, woman ? . . . or pinched it . . . or squeezed it ! Don't let Keziah speak, sir, she don't know 'ow to say it. Joe 'ave been and cut 'is bloody thumb off ! "

He covered his face with his hands, but whilst I tried to find soothing words to fit the tragedy, he went on :

" What price gloves now, eh ? Good for scissors cuttin' ! What about his near-side gaiter buttons ? Think o' milkin' wi'out a thumb ! 'E didn't 'alf cut it off, neither, did 'e ? Not 'alf. Why " (rising from his seat and becoming positively dribbling), " 'e comes in 'ere just as we was 'avin' a early tea, 'e comes in and stands at the table lookin' as dobbly as a maggot, and I says to 'im, I says, ' Where's your manners to ? Take

yer 'at off and ask a blessin'.' Not 'e, so I just tips it off 'is 'ead meself, and—and—and 'is thumb fell flup into the drippin'!! Oh, my Lord!" And he again subsided into his chair.

"'Tis gospel, sir." His wife took up the parable. "Every word he says is true—only Levi do take it so badly if things 'appen sudden-like. You see, I don't doubt but what Joe 'e was bringin' it back under 'is cap for me to see, and if I might make so bold I got it 'ere in the Noah's Ark on the mantel."

As she spoke she reached for that china ornament over her husband's head. But he had either heard or divined her intention, and was beyond facing "it" a second time, for with an "Oh, my Lord!" he crossed the floor like a streak and was gone. At that Keziah seemed to break down, for when I turned to speak with her she was sobbing with her apron thrown over her head. I soon got out of her, however, that not only was Levi's tale true, but that Joe had already departed for the surgery in the nearest town. As his mother put it, he was "quite snug and cosy on a dray-load o' sheepskins, as was bound for the tannery down-along."

She then pressed me to take a cup of tea, and, as I drank, a loud crash against the side-wall

was the signal for Mrs. Keitch to thrust her head through the lattice window and shout :

" Levi, let go them udders, do ! He'm a bit tricksy with 'em, sir, when 'e'm carryin' a drop o' cider, and gets actin' a tug-o'-war with the poor craturs. No wonder that one kicked, for they was milked not half an hour agone. But in 'is takin's we do mostly find Levi wi' a stool somewhere. Only two weeks since, Joe (what belongs to the thumb, sir) 'e comes in and says, ' Dad's got the milk fever again,' and sure enough, there we finds 'im in the back parlour a'milkin o' the curtain tassels ! 'Tis so simple-like, but, there, 'e were always a bit diddy from a lad."

As though to bear out her statement, at that moment Levi pushed his head through the back-door with the dramatic announcement : " Keziah ! Rebekah's dry—oh, my Lord ! " And was once more lost to view.

Mrs. Keitch resumed : " Sad as 'tis for poor Joe's thumb, already I seems to see an 'igher power a guidin' of 'is 'ook, sir. Yes, I do believe I do ! Joe be the only one of my fourteen what really do favour Levi and 'is sloppiness. 'E always 'ave been one for milkin', 'as Joe, and takes a'most an un'ealthy pleasure in it. True, I catched Annie, my youngest—(terrible gert girl

for her years, is Annie)—I catched 'er with symptoms, as late as Friday. Playin' in the road, she was, with a bucket and toy squirt in a puddle. I shall keep an eye lifted on 'er for a bit. But I 'ope I taken 'er in good time as I did Thomas. I found six months back-along as 'e was bein' learned to chime the church bells and play tunes on 'em with a new 'paratus with handles, as they set up in the tower last Easter, but 'e've showed nothin' since I stoppit that. Maybe, 'tis to remove 'is temptation as the Lord 'ave dropped on Joe's poor thumb. We can't say for certain, but we may think so, I suppose. The two ruts I spends my spare time keepin' my fourteen's wheels out of, is cider and milkin'. They'm all teetattlers from birth, and I do hope—but I've had a deal of anxiety again of late all along of a mission what was held in the parish a few weeks back-along. As a mother of fourteen and a dairy farm, I don't 'old with such. No, I don't. The prayin' woman what come around this district was a bright young spark, I reckon, what knows 'er way up and down the ladder blindfold—but windy, you understand, wonderful windy! Without knowin' it, 'er put temptations in my children's path by talkin' about the need of feedin' the young with milk and not with meat; as new-

born babies they should desire the milk of the Word ; lookin' forward to a future Home flowin' with milk an' honey ; and so forth, and such like, and them and that.

" 'Owever I couldn't refuse 'er one effort in my 'ouse, but 'avin' invited 'er one day for eleven forty-five, I sets our cuckoo clock for twelve, surely thinkin' that would erupt' er. But I didn't need to 'ave bothered, for the fishmonger come round (a thing 'e rarely does) and Levi took and bought a very tasty 'addick, which 'e throwed through the winder where we knelt, and it brought up on the table just in front of the prayin' woman, the tail nigh givin' her a flip in the face, if it didn't quite. And layin' there with the sun hot on it that wasn't no incense to any of us, and I see the prayin' woman sniffin' for a hinspiration to a short cut in 'er collect. But it was the arrival of three of my cats atop of the fish—(what 'ad watched it come, you understand)—as finished the job. She was up and off—wonderful slippy afore ever the bird in the clock spoke, and I ain't seen 'er since. Oh, my blessedness ! There 'e goes again. I do wonder where he'm to now then."

This last remark was occasioned by our catching sight of Levi, still armed with pail and milking stool, crossing the yard outside with very uncertain

gait. Seeing him disappear into a barn, however, apparently set his good wife's mind at rest, for heaving a deep sigh of relief she added, " Oh, well, there's nothin' in there but carrots and a few lambs' tails. He won't do no harm to they, pull as he may."

CHAPTER VI

LOUISA KNIBB'S HERITAGE

AS I was asking one afternoon about Joe Keitch's hand I learned from his mother that Louisa Knibb—by courtesy, Mrs. Knibb, her next-door neighbour—was unwell, and would be glad to see me.

Fuchsia Cottage, some two hundred yards from Woodleigh Farm, is a sweet little place with a moss-grown thatched roof and walls which are creeper-clad and covered with clematis, roses, scented verbena, and wistaria. In front the strip of garden, protected by a neat row of wooden palings, over which the cottage windows wink into the road, is gay with simple flowers. With no houses nearer than the farm and one deserted and dilapidated cottage just opposite, it is in a lonely enough situation.

In answer to my knock I was invited by a distant voice to enter and be pleased to walk upstairs. Within, all the appointments were scrupulously clean, and if the furniture was simple to the point

of severity, traces of " natty " little old-maidish contrivances met me at every turn.

In the bedroom, at the top of the stairs, lay Mrs. Knibb, the picture of a fine old woman, still retaining good, clear-cut features and sparkling brown eyes, who bade me welcome when I told her who I was, and how I came to be there.

" Very kind in Mrs. Keitch, I'm sure. Yes, I'm poorly, and the sore of it lies in that I got no one to do nothin' for me, sir, so I can't ask you to set by the fire, there bein' none. But there ! I mustn't complain, my health's been very tidy up till now."

" You live quite alone ? And have you no relations anywhere who could come to you for a week or two ? " I asked.

" Solitary as a hermit, sir. Not a relative in this world as I knows of—'cept, well, he be me cousin to be sure——"

" Oh, a man is no use," I said. " You want a nurse."

It was sufficiently obvious that the poor thing was really ill, and likely enough a hospital case.

" Why not go to the County Hospital, Mrs. Knibb, just for a short visit ? "

" Out of the question, sir, excuse me contra-

dictin' of you. Out of all reason—why, 'tis suicide ! "

" Surely not ! I can give you a ticket, and they will take great care of you."

" As a new-comer hereabouts, o' course you'm a stranger and a pilgrim. But if you can put up with a trifle o' family 'istory, I can make it all as plain as the Book itself."

And arranging herself more comfortably in the bed, and re-tying the strings of her cap under her chin, Mrs. Knibb entered on the narration with remarkable vigour.

" This 'ouse belonged to my father, Amos Knibb, and I were 'is only child, and did for 'im years and years after mother was graved. He took 'is inheritance seventeen years back-along, too, but afore 'e set out 'e were very warm on my marryin' 'is nephew, John Coker. But Lord ! I was past marryin' and givin' in marriage by then, and as for John Coker ! Well, there ! ! ' No, dad, never,' I says. ' 'Ow be you to live, then ? ' he asks. ' By the lace-mendin' and the glove-makin', same as I always done,' I says. ' But you'll 'ave this 'ouse, Louisa, and 'tis a tidy lill' 'ive. 'Tisn't seemly to waste it on one alone. Take and marry 'im, lass. You might inform 'im, likely, if 'e be a bit wild.' ' He don't want no informin', I says. ' 'Tis the 'ouse he be

after, and a downright bad man at 'eart, as you know well, dad. I be surprised in you. Why, 'is throat be an open sepulchre, and I'd rather be buried decent nor swallowed up of 'im.'

" ' You might take and lead 'im through this desert of sin, Louisa,' says father. ' Maybe, 'tis your mission from on 'igh to move 'is stubborn, spotted nature, with your meek and gentle 'and and ready words.'

" ' Gentle won't do it,' I says. ' And meek, eh ? Moses wouldn't 'a done much on a rockin' 'orse, even with Aaron up be'ind,' I says.

" Father seemed terrible 'eart-set on it, 'owever, and then one day 'e was struck simple, and was took sudden in the end thereof.

" Now when I was scurryin' things round for a bit o' black, and that, John Coker comes in—that's my same cousin as bides opposite ('im with a livin' pimpsel on 'is cheek)—and 'e say, ' You don't need to look for the will, 'cause I knows where 'tis to—in my 'ouse and keepin' as bein' executioner.'

" So when the funeral was over (me and John was the only followers) 'e took and brought the dockiment and showed it to me.

" Oh, dear ! Oh, my dear, dear ! ! Such a will it was, as you wouldn't think from my old dad. 'Twas my death warrant, no less, and a

livin' death at that. The 'ouse, so it was wrote, and everythin' in it was for me, but only on the understandin' as I should marry John Coker; or else, if I didn't, I must never leave the cottage for more than two hours at any time, for if I did, John was to 'ave the right to it and everythin' in it for 'is, and me turned out.

"There it was all as plain as plain, and 'twas signed at bottom by dad, and two other men what worked over to farmer Transome's, but they had 'a left some weeks afore dad was called."

Having wiped away a tear on the sheet, Mrs. Knibb sat up in the bed, and, throwing a shawl over her shoulders, applied herself with even more energy than before to the recitation of history.

"O' course, you'll understand we 'ad some steam over it. John say the only possible way was for me to take 'im into the Ark, and I says the only thing was for 'im to wait and get in when I done with it, and got my orders to steer for Araratty—or earlier, if I took and broke the terms o' the will.

"'For they was all decent animals what was took into the Ark,' I says. 'No room for dirt or bad manners, there bein' no brooms them early days, and if Master Shem or Japhey 'ad took and

got tight, same as you does, where would the skiff a been to ? ' I says.

" ' You can't break my spirit,' I telled 'im. He sweared till 'e sweated as 'e would 'ave the 'ouse, whilst I folded me 'ands and closed me eyes, and said nothin' more than ' Ignorant,' ' Rebellious,' ' Blasphemious,' ' Stiffnecked,' ' Buttonhooks,' ' Pharisees,' and such-like soothin' words as come 'andy, till at last 'e left in an 'urricane. So there it is, and 'ave been ever since, 'e and me watchin' and watchin', the spirit against the letter and the letter against the spirit, and both be wearin' a trifle thin."

" Do you mean, Mrs. Knibb," said I, " that for seventeen years——"

But without allowing me to finish she broke in, " For seventeen years John ain't catched me two hours off these premises, sir. Neighbours and passers-by does my shoppin', fetches and takes my lace and gloves and that, and all the while 'e 'aven't as you might say took 'is eye off the place."

" What is his work then ? " I asked. " How does he earn his own living ? "

" 'E do a bit o' work times, when 'e'm minded to ; but 'e 'ops back 'alf a dozen times in a day to see and make sure as I be about. I've knowed 'im to come of a night, even, and knock at the door till I speaks, or, better, drops some'at at

'im. Last time 'Mizpah' I says, out o' this winder, and 'e took the block o' wood on side of 'is 'ead, which put a full stop to that little dance. 'Go 'ome and lay a fig on it,' I says. Of a day 'is winders overlook mine—you may see 'im watchin' there now, I'll be bound."

I looked out, and sure enough I saw John Coker at his window.

"I 'ave a' tried ev'ry way thinkable to get a side snap on 'im, but 'e bain't to be took in anywise. Oh, 'e's sharp, is John Coker, nail o' Satan's claw as was never cut. I 'ave done 'im seventeen years, but I feels most past it now. 'E 'aven't never offered no violence, I'll say that for 'im—his stomick ain't built that way. Of a fine evenin' 'e'll set in 'is garden, and make fun o' me for 'playin' with 'is affections,' as 'e says, and 'ot nights 'is langwidge is at times most impossible. 'Tis a wonder 'e 'aven't been took with a palsy, or some'at in 'is vitals afore this. You see, there's a nice bit o' garden, and a well, and a few cider trees, and a tool shed and that—them's where 'is affections is to. I can't 'ardly step abroad o' the garden without 'is seein' me.

"I started by 'avin' new locks to the doors, 'im 'avin' keys fittin' the old 'uns, and I went out just to try 'im, but I were back twenty minutes within me two hours, to find 'im with a smile on

'is face. On one side of it, 'owever, the pimpsel be 'ard set and won't stretch. And there 'e was, waitin' with a crowbar to break in. That wasn't no go!

"Another time I was told 'e was abed with the brownkitties, so off I slips to the town, but by gettin' a lift in a milk cart I was back 'ome inside me time, and finds 'im in the garden with a gun, ready for to shoot the lill' dog as I'd left in charge.

"'You'm that attractive, Louisa,' 'e say, 'I be bound to come nibblin,' you see.'

"'You skip now, sharp,' I says, and with a mop I soon dusted un into the road.

"Then a friend 'o mine come to tea with me one day, and counsels me to let 'im in and prepare a welcome for 'im what 'e might remember and keep 'is distance thereafter. I took and done all as she telled me—pasted up the doors and winders and chimbleys and that with brown paper, and next day I draws down the blinds and lights a sulphuric candle (what she sent me) in each room, each one sittin' in a saucer. 'Tis as good as a spring clean whatever,' she telled me, 'and will do the place no end o' good, beside John Coker. Then I sets off for a little walk, but creeps back very quiet down the garden hedge and 'ides 'andy, so as if 'e comes and opes the door I can

bang it to be'ind 'im, and give 'im a dose of the muck inside. Well, I waited a good hour, when all of a sudden my black cat, Jezebel, come out o' the scullery-sink-drain like a bullet, 'er coat set on end stiff as bristles, and 'er tail straight as a steeple. She took and went up the creepers side o' the 'ouse like a thing demented, and started on the thatch atop, pullin' it out any'ow, and cuttin' such a caper as never was. That frighted me. What if the man 'ad arrived afore I come back? What if I 'ad took and overstepped the bounds of my martyrism, and 'e was already suffocated? 'Oh, my dear, dear!' I mutters quite dazy like, 'Lord, lay not this sin to my charge. Bad as 'e is, if John Coker is not, whither shall I go?' And I rushes and opes the door, and throws everythin' wide—(sakes, that do smell, does sulphuric. I don't believe 'twill ever properly leave the reeds again)—and it 'adn't done no morsel o' good, for John 'ad never been near the place, or if 'e 'ad I suppose 'e reckonised 'is natural element in the smell and popped off. O' course, if 'e *'ad* chanced with an overdose inside 'twould ha' been a good riddance, but I wouldn't ha' liked to ha' been the ridderer. Moreover, I'd forgot me canary bird, Rebekah, same as me cat, and the pore thing lay as dead as a sausage, 'ands up.

" Another day I took and dressed up a figure in some o' me ole' clothes, and set it in a chair by the fire, back to the winder, and went out to tea. As I come back, who should I meet by all that was unlucky, but Coker 'isself. He looked at me scared-like, and 'e say, ' Louisa ! it ain't ever you ? Why, I see you not ten minutes back settin' in your chair by the fire. Oh ! Ah ! I see——' ' Now then, out o' my way,' I says, ' you'm doity. 'Ow can I be at one and the same time 'ere and there ? ' ' We'll soon see who be right,' 'e says, and starts off to run back 'ere to get a peep again. It wouldn't never ha' done to let 'im see the trick, or I couldn't ha' played it again impunitively. So I picks up me skirt and I triddles along through the mud as best I may just be'ind 'im, prayin' as I went, and I was answered. 'E went a thought faster on 'is wheels nor what I could, but the Lord was on my side, what don't take no pleasure in any man's legs, least not in John Coker's, for 'e slips up not fifty paces short o' Fuchsia Cottage, and sprains 'is ankil most awkward. 'E were squiffy, you know, sir. Oh, yes, 'e were entirely squiffed that day, was John.

" One time I gives a chap sixpence to keep the place against 'im whiles I went out, but all along of 'avin' to turn back 'cause o' the snow half-way —that was one more deposition o' Providence—

I found Coker 'ad give the vermin another shillin' to clear out. 'I don't mind spendin' money on you, Louisa,' he say, 'we was made to spend and be spent on one another, comfortin' and wholesome—Knibb and Coker—Coker Knibb, see?' 'I sees a lunattic,' I says, and passed indoors.

"He come to me only a week back and say, 'I got to quit. Governor wants the cottage. I be in a bunker, so I come for Louie Niblick to get me out'—('tis a loose way o' talkin' 'e picked up when 'e was used to cadger on the linnies, sir)—'but if she don't, I ain't goin' to give up the match yet. I got two strokes in 'and still,' 'e say. So I be expectin' some new game any hour, and me laid by and onable to meet 'im square."

"All this is very sad, as well as very bad, for you, Mrs. Knibb," said I. "But now, about that will—was it ever proved?"

"No need whatever, sir, for I read it meself."

"In my opinion it isn't worth the paper it is written on. It is vexatious and ridiculous, and I believe no Court would uphold it. But however that may be, I am going to see Mr. John Coker for myself," and I rose to go.

"Now don't you go nigh 'im, I do beseech you, sir. 'E isn't fit. You'll catch something, I don't doubt. He won't do you a mischief. 'E

barks loud, but 'asn't the attack of a dung-fly. A ignorant coward is Coker, what don't know enough to scratch the right place what 'itches."

Bluff was the line of action upon which I determined, as I knocked upon the door of the tumble-down shed—you could not call it a cottage—occupied by John Coker. That he was at home I knew, so upon receiving no answer I entered uninvited. There he sat upon an upturned box, drinking tea out of a tin mug, and looking about as evil as I had expected. His face was covered with hair which appeared to be infested with cocoons. Dirt and squalor prevailed on all sides.

"I have been talking to Mrs. Knibb," I began.

"Miss Louisa Knibb, and damn your manners," he interrupted vehemently.

"And she tells me," I continued, taking no notice of the interruption, "that her father's will is in your keeping, in which of course she is mistaken. But we must excuse her, as she is so ill. The property, she told me, passes to you at her death, but there again she must be in error——"

Without a word he disappeared up the rickety stairs, and as quickly came down with a document in his hand.

" Spread it open upon the table. I promise not to touch it," I said.

" You'd better try it on," was his rejoinder, unfolding it, but keeping a filthy paw guarding it top and bottom.

The will was certainly in the terms given me by Mrs. Knibb, and the attestation clause seemed in perfect order. So I was forced to chance it, and lead boldly. Taking out a pocket lens I examined the signatures at the foot with great care, and then, looking him straight in the face, said coolly :

" That signature is not Amos Knibb's ! "

When I said this he started back, and opened his mouth.

" Now stand quite still, please," I went on, and producing from my pocket a small electric torch I pointed it at him.

" What's your little game now, yer 'oliness ? " he cried in a quaver.

" Only one moment, but quite still," I replied, switching on the light. " I want a photograph of you for the newspapers—John Coker, the Will-forger."

Like an over-ripe mushroom he sank in a putrid heap upon the box, and then, seizing the paper, fled from the hovel down the road. He has never been seen from that day to this.

I went back to Fuchsia Cottage and told Louisa Knibb what had happened. When once my reading of her riddle was thoroughly grasped, she threw up her hands in horror, and exclaimed, " Of all the gilded Herods, John Coker, you'm the wormiest ! "

CHAPTER VII

A VILLAGE WEDDING

'APPY! The owner of this sobriquet must be by far the most dolorous, woebegone-looking individual in the county. Market days excepted, I never meet him divorced from a steaming manure cart, with his clothes in keeping, and a short, black cutty pipe hanging in the corner of his mouth.

I wonder how many of his acquaintances are aware that his name is Harold Sparks? Yet for the very reason that Dame Nature has been so bitterly ungracious, no name fits him by its apparent unfitness but 'Appy. He is a thick-set, awkward, heavy-limbed lout of twenty-nine, with no attempt at control over limb or feature. His face is that of a bulldog, flat as a brewer's dray, with a badly broken nose, green uncertain eyes, which never look folks in the face, and a heavily under-hung, massive lower jaw and a portentous chin. His head is thatched with a shock of ungovernable coarse red hair, which hangs down in front, and even protrudes through the broken

crown of a shapeless straw hat, crammed down over his head and resting on his ears. An immense mouth much drooped at the corners finishes the picture. His voice is sepulchral, slow, deliberate, and his vocabulary very strictly limited. Doubtless he has many virtues as yet unrevealed, but at least I know that 'Appy, after the fashion of the day, has specialised in one thing, and in Manure he is head and shoulders above his compeers.

" I know wot's wot, and wot I donow o' yard dung ain't worth a sniff. Pass me an 'andful and I'll price it for yer 'ere and now per load," he once said to me, as he held out his bare hand for a sample.

I have never yet, even under the greatest stress, seen 'Appy smile. He is often moved, no doubt, but then you must be initiated into the symptoms of his emotions to be in a position to interpret them. His appreciation of comedy is shown by violently rubbing his chin with his thumb, and of tragedy by pulling upon the lobe of his right ear.

When I met 'Appy some time ago he was plying his usual trade, so getting to windward of the cart I hailed him :

" Well, 'Appy, any news ? "

He called upon his horse to stand.

"In a sense, sir, yes, and you'm just the gentleman I'm wantin' for five minutes."

"Come, then, now's your chance. What can I do for you?"

"'Tis just your opinion I be wantin'. I be thinkin' o' makin' a little change."

"Are you going to be married, or grow a beard, or what?"

"No fear o' them tangles for I! No, sir, 'tis the confection-ary trade."

"God bless my soul——" The words slipped out before I could check them, so rude was the shock.

"Ah! I see you 'ave objections. Now, what's agin it? There be a good lill' openin', I unnerstand, down town."

I searched desperately for obstacles. The sweetmeats must be saved!

"Well, 'Appy," I replied, after a pause, "you see, the price of sugar is rising fast, by leaps and bounds indeed, wages are high, and then there are paper bags, and string, and so on."

"That's enough, sir—don't say no more—I thought as 'ow you must know. These be the lill' things they don't tell we."

But he looked so exceedingly miserable that, hastening to change the subject, I said,

"We are going to get a change of weather, I believe."

"No," he answered emphatically, after scanning the sky; "no, we ain't, beggin' your parding, we are not! Not on a Friday, leastways."

"Not on a Friday! What do you mean by that, 'Appy?"

"'Ave you never noticed, sir, all the years you've lived, too, as we never gets a change o' weather on a Friday? Ah! I see you ain t. Well, you'm learnin'. 'Tis as true as we stand 'ere. You can't tell I o' one change o' weather as 'ave took place on a Friday, now can you?"

At a moment's notice this was a stumper.

"No, I see you can't," he continued triumphantly. "'Tis no morsel o' use for you to try."

"Perhaps not," I replied, much amused, "but I noticed that my glass——"

"Glasses, glasses, look to that now," and, warming up to his subject, in which he evidently felt himself immeasurably my superior, he continued, "that's just where you gentlemen gets took in: terrible 'tis." And his pity and disgust so overcame him that he was forced to expectorate heavily. "Terrible! Glasses! Why, look at the price o' medicine bottles!"

With which cryptic remark, looking if possible

sadder than ever, he whipped up his horse, and in a halo of steam went on his way—and went unanswered.

What did he mean? The Friday business was, of course, pure superstition. But what was the fallacy of gentlemen's weather glasses? As the cottagers' form of barometer, from time immemorial, has consisted of an ordinary medicine bottle inverted in a tumbler half filled with water (the changes of pressure being indicated by the rise or fall of the water in the bottle), I have thought since that the modern cheapening of glass must, for 'Appy, have rendered all such phenomena untrustworthy. And if that was so, how much more fallible the barometers of the gentry must be! There is no fathoming these simple folk—but how charming they are!

I hardly know why, but for some reason I had always regarded 'Appy in the light of a confirmed bachelor. It was, therefore, with no little interest that I listened a month ago to his banns being read out in the village church, and three weeks later the bucolic maiden, Sarah Jane Winslow, who had found in him an eligible *parti*, asked me to conduct the service, the Rector being absent on his holiday.

I readily consented, and sending them a small

wedding gift was, in turn, invited to come and drink their health after the ceremony. It was very pretty of them and I gladly accepted.

Punctually at the appointed hour I found myself confronted at the chancel step by Ben Brindle, the parish clerk, and the wedding party. The bridegroom was habited in a suit of mustard-coloured serge, and wore a blue and white spotted tie. His straw hat, placed during the service upon the eagle's head of the lectern for safety, had streamers of red, white, and blue ribbon, and four large asters in a glass tube were fixed in his buttonhole. The bride wore a petunia-coloured skirt, a white blouse, the brightest of yellow straw hats garlanded with cherries and an immense blue ostrich plume, while a heavy paste buckle at her bosom represented two hearts entwined. The best man, Fred Galloper, was correctly attired in lavender-coloured trousers, black broadcloth coat and vest, a bright scarlet tie with a horseshoe pin, and a buttonhole of a single yellow dahlia. The two bridesmaids, sisters of the bride, aged about sixteen and eighteen years respectively, were dressed alike in sky-blue skirts, salmon-pink blouses, white straw hats wreathed with convolvuluses, on which brass butterflies sought for honey, white cotton gloves, and bouquets composed of scarlet geraniums, crimson dahlias, and

variegated China asters, tied up as tightly as a lettuce.

All went well until the betrothal came on. The bridegroom got through this part creditably, but with the unfortunate bride it was another story. Her nerves had entirely forsaken her, and, seeing this, I said quietly, " Now, try to repeat these words after me—' I, Sarah Jane ' "—and got no answer. Having paused for a moment, I made a second attempt—" I, Sarah Jane," which was equally abortive, for she still trembled like a leaf, and was entirely beyond articulation. The best man here whispered hoarsely to the bridegroom :

" Got any salts ? "

" Only Epsoms, and they'm in the cow-barton," said 'Appy.

Turning to the bridesmaids, the best man tried again :

" 'Tis the fumes of they buckets, likely ! 'Old 'em be'ind yer. 'Er mother was a strong woman, too."

" 'Ush, 'ush ! Talking is confined by the parson and principals," said Ben Brindle.

After a long pause I made another attempt.

" Now, take plenty of time, and do not get flurried. Just repeat softly after me these words : ' I, Sarah Jane ' "—and at the same moment

Harold, by way of added encouragement, gave the poor thing a frightful dig in the ribs with his thumb, saying loudly, " Now come, Jane, pull yerself together—be a man ! " And these combined efforts being instantly crowned with success, Jane came up to the scratch manfully.

After the ceremony I elicited such information regarding the bride as the register required and turned to the husband.

" What is your age ? "

He, in turn, addressing his wife, demanded :

" 'Ow old be I, Jane ? "

" I don't know. 'Ow old be you ? "

" That's my question to you," he replied, eyeing her with some disfavour. " 'Tis no answer to repeat it. I don't know, sir. Say twenty-nine—'tis near enough."

" What is your occupation ? "

He referred again to his wife.

" What is it, Jane ? "

" I don't know, 'Appy. What is it ? "

" There, look to that ! " said Harold, glaring at each of us in turn. " Well, put down carter, sir—'twill serve."

" And your father's name ? "

" What did they call 'im, Jane ? "

" I never see 'im. What were 'is name ? "

" Well, I 'ad a father, for sure ! "

" We will take that for granted, but can't you remember his name ? " I asked.

This was too great a call upon his brain, and in his exasperation he pushed his face close to Jane's and said truculently :

" Look 'ere, my girl, who said 'twould be all plain sailin' ? These be the one or two questions you should ha' looked up afore you come, yer know. For a 'elpmeet you'm begun nice and early, ain't yer ? The gentleman took and warned yer back end o' the service, not to fall into none o' these mazey-mesmerisms—'cause I 'eard 'im ! Six months o' this, and we shan't know nothin' atween us 'cept the bowels of a lunattic 'sylum. You'll please to excuse 'er, sir," he added as he turned to me, " I've took a step in the dark, seemingly ! "

It was all nicely adjusted, however, before we parted ; and they left the church the best of friends once more.

The subsequent levee was held in their own cottage, the front door of which would only partially open, owing to the floor of the bedroom above having sunk. Besides the company already referred to, there were also the four bell-ringers, for whom accommodation was found in the larder adjoining, the door of which was left open.

I made them a short speech, wishing the pair every happiness and prosperity in their married life, and proposed their joint health in a glass of port.

It was with considerable difficulty that 'Appy, still smothered with confetti, was got upon his feet to respond. What eventually roused him was an overt allusion to his " nervites," i.e. a possible infection from the bride's complaint which had so touched his pride during the Marriage Service. At last he was up, and made a noble effort :—

" Friends all . . ." (sticking his clay pipe, still alight, through the ribbon round his hat) " 'tis a beautifule day . . . I'm thankin' 'im . . . you'm grateful-like. . . . We'm all pleased then as the gentleman what done the service done us the service as 'e done . . . 'tis only right and meet and that. . . . I'm drinkin' 'is 'ealth, and 'tis plain it ain't a good 'un." The toast of my health was drunk with acclamation. " 'E've tied we in a knot—so say Master Brindle—not but what a knot, what's not the knot what we lot got " (uproarious applause), " well, ours is no slipper knot then, and if it were I ain't lettin' 'er slip." (" Hear, hear " and cries of " keep tight hold ! " " start fair and square ! ") " 'Tis a beautifule day . . . 'ottest August what ever I knowed . . .

golly! 'ow I sweated afore we come out o' that church. . . . I'm not forgettin' our weddin'-day . . . don't come above once or twice in a life-time. . . . I'm drinkin' 'er 'ealth!"

And "The Wedding Day" was drunk by the company.

'Appy looked about him and went on.

"'Tis a nice lill' 'ouse . . . lays lew and that . . . only fault's the rent . . . up to yet the garden isn't talkin' much above a whisper. . . . I'll mend 'er with a pig and that. . . . So far as Jane goes, you'm mindin' she when 'er lived along of 'er father Jack Winslow . . . what was shepherd to Farmer Grant . . . what lived up to Beetham downs . . . what 'ad the foot-rot in 'is tegs last fall . . . 'andy wench . . . lissome wi' the darnin' and that . . . and no tongue-whettin' belongin' to she . . . 'tis a weighty matter. I'm drinkin' 'er 'ealth."

His toast, "The Missus" was drunk enthusiastically.

"'Tis a beautifule day . . . wi' signs of a change . . . my blasted corns . . ." (a voice—"'tis the rice likely.")

"What about the Best Man, 'Appy?" asked Brindle.

"Ah! now Fred Galloper done 'is bit well . . . versed in 'is parts is Fred . . . the best man

'e is . . . better nor any best-man better man nor I can't better." (applause) " I'm drinkin' 'is 'ealth."

The toast of " The Best Man " was drunk, and Galloper suggested " The Bridesmaids."

" Them bridlemaids . . . they ain't waitin' long for their men, neither, if I know what's what . . . them dresses was ordered for a purpose, if I'm a cricket. . . . I doubt I got the pick of 'em in Jane, but others is sure to come pickin' presently . . . and Daisy and Vi'let is worth watchin'. . . . That aren't a per'mant swellin' on Vi'let's cheek . . . 'tis a aniseed bull's eye what I give 'er; I'm drinkin' their 'ealth. . . . And there sets Master Brindle now . . . 'e knows what 'e'm doin', I don't need to be tellin' yer, eye of a 'awk, nothin' isn't escapin' Ben, ' from a flea to a flood ' as the sayin' is. None can't dig a more comfortabler grave nor Brindle. 'Ere to-day and gone to-morrow: I'm drinkin' 'is 'ealth."

Then there was a suggestion from Daisy.

" The Ringers, 'Appy ! "

" Ah ! 'twas a right good peal as you pulled on them old bells, worthy of a couple same as me and Jane. Tenor was a thought be'ind, time and again: wants re-'angin' or some'at, I doubt. I'm drinkin' yer 'ealth. Friends all . . . 'tis

a beautifule day. . . . I sweats—I done," and amid tumultuous applause 'Appy resumed his seat.

"A modelled speech," whispered Fred Galloper into my ear as I took my leave.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NESTLING SWALLOWS

FOUR days ago I imperilled as many precious lives in a like number of seconds. As usual, several pairs of swallows have taken possession of the roof of my boat-house for their nests ; and in pushing out my punt I caught the end of my pole in one of them, which came down with a splash into the water ; three of the young, not a week hatched, being thrown into the river. It took me but a second to secure the shell and nest with one baby yet within it, floating like Moses ; and little more to rescue his three shipwrecked brethren, dry them carefully in a handkerchief, and set them in the sun. But the cries of the distracted parents for help brought a veritable throng of their friends and neighbours, until the boat-house hummed with wings and rang with their deafening chorus, " Careless, careless ! "

By climbing upon the tie-beams I could easily reach the roof above, and with some string I firmly reattached the shell in its former position

against a joist; and in one more journey I replaced the entire brood in their nursery.

I have just paid them a professional visit, and am greatly relieved to be able to report all doing well, none, apparently, being any the worse. In three months' time these tender mites will be facing their long migration to Africa. How many will reach it? How many will return here next spring? In the strife how many, deceived it may be by the glamour of a lighthouse, will stun themselves and fall a prey to the cold hungry waves beneath? How many will succumb to the cold, and with numbed wings fall behind in life's race for safety, and give up in sheer disappointment? Yet perchance this late brood may find rest and breathing space in a ship's rigging, and, once more invigorated, make a final effort with success.

My path lay across the churchyard. The shadows of the mounds and moss-grown headstones were throwing loving arms about each other in the sunset glow, as in blest communion and peaceful memory. But on the far side of them there stood a solitary living figure close against the wall dividing the churchyard from the manor house, and in it I recognised Jim Webb. I knew him and old Martha, his other half, very well. Both are on the shady side of eighty, and

live in a most picturesque thatched cottage, whose garden, always bright with flowers, faces the high-road a-top of yonder hill. Oftentimes I have a " tell " with Martha of a summer's evening, as she sits in her doorway a-patching of Jim's breeches : many's the time her fading eyesight makes her beckon to me as I pass and beg me to " lend her a hand and threadle her a needle, else Jim must be left in holes for certain " : I always leave her a full dozen, all ready in her cushion, in reserve. A simple, faithful, God-fearing and lovable couple are these. Jim, indeed, is a picture of an old man, with white locks, blue eyes, and a face lined and seamed with age and exposure, and the joys and sorrows of fourscore years.

And here he stood in the fading light, leaning heavily upon his stick, a long smock reaching to his knees, and an old felt hat, which once was mine, crammed down upon his head. He was staring at the wall in front of him quite lost in thought.

" What is it, Jim ? " I asked, laying a gentle hand upon his shoulder.

" Dear, dear ! you took me unbeknown, sir. I were havin' a think with meself. You'm seein' that writin' there ? " indicating with his stick a hieroglyphic, made by himself, since Jim can

neither read nor write, rudely scratched upon a block of Ham-hill stone built into the wall of the manor stables which just here abut upon the churchyard. "Well, that be my mark, sir: and in case our parson 'e forgets, or we should 'ave another change afore my own turn comes, I'd like for you just to be knowin' where my bed does lie. 'Tis to be just there below that writin' o' mine, twixt this boundary ditch, see you, and that first mound."

"I promise to remember and I will see that it is kept for you so far as I can, Jim. Would you like to tell me why you are anxious it should be just here?"

"I will, sir, though you may smile. Years agone old Sir George's charger, 'Crusader' 'is name was, what I took care of years and years, fell into an old well and so 'ad to be shot: I were mortal fond of 'im, and unbeknown to any others, me and the two stable lads took and buried 'im one night just 'ere 'ard by the ditch. Many's the time I've slept in 'is stall when 'e seemed down'earted: I done all I could for 'im, and I'd like to lay near 'un when I goes. A Christian 'orse 'e was, if ever there 'as been one, and 'tis but the fringe of God's acre is this ditch, when all be said and done."

"I see, Jim," I replied, touched by the old

man's real devotion to his dead friend. " I quite understand and it shall not be forgotten."

" You may think it strange, sir, but there it is : and if, as you say, you understand, there's another reason, too. I'd like to be a-tellin' you —not another soul though—for maybe you'd be understandin' this 'un, too. Do yer see this 'ere first mound ? That's Missy Ruth, sir, Heaven keep 'er. You'd not be a-knowin' o' Miss Ruth ; no, 'tis years agone, fifty and more, parson's lill' mite she was ! One late summer's evenin', just the like o' this one then, I was for 'ome, and found 'er busy wi' a trowel just over there agin the pales : that busy she was that 'er never noticed I, and I stood and watchit of 'er for some time ; with the sun-sinkin' light on 'er 'ead o' gold 'air, and 'er pinney—a lill' blue thing it was wi' no sleeves to it—and bare feet that pink and dainty, a vision she was, ah ! that she was ! When she see me a-leanin' agin the rails 'er flushes up and 'er comes across, and lookin' at me very solemn in the eye 'er says : ' Webb, you promise not to tell : you promise now,' and she patted of me 'and—I can feel it now. ' No,' I says, ' I ain't for tellin', Missy, I ain't got nothin' to tell as I knows on.' ' Then come,' she say, and leads me over to the pales : and pickin' up a draggled bit of goods from off the grass, 'er

says, ' This is my dolly Miriam : you don't know Miriam, but she's dead now so I won't 'troduce you. She was none too careful, and got in the way of Nanny's cuttin'-out scissors, through goin' to sleep upon the nursery table : and now she's all run out, and the white mice 'ave 'ad the bran. 'Er eyes are gone and she can't stand : and Nanny says she must 'ave played real ducks and dukes with a delicate restitution—I don't know what she means, but I've told God about it all. And now I'm going . . . to bury her,' and wi' that 'er started sobbin' up agin my dirty coat. I was mortal fond o' little Missy Ruth, and 'twas more nor any man could bear : you see, sir, I never 'ad chick nor child o' me own—but eh ! I loved that wee one, that I did.

" So I sets me down upon a mound, and ' Come, 'old up,' I says, ' she ain't done for yet by a good bit,' and we examine into the bundle o' rags quite doctor fashion : and I points out the weaker places and 'ow we should perceed, and then I says : ' Run, little lady, and get I on the quiet a needle and a length o' twist,' and off 'er capers like a rabbit. With an 'andful of sweet 'ay, pulled out from Squire Ducat's rick just 'andy, I 'ad a-filled out Miriam's legs and all or ever Missy Ruth got back : and then we tied two black

buttons off my leggin's in the eye-'oles—when I got me 'ome Martha missed them buttons sooner nor I could shut the wicket gate up to our cottage, so she did—and we sewed together that long scissor-slit in 'er poor belly, oh ! a terrible piece o' work it was. ' 'Tis quite a resurrection, Missy,' I says 'oldin' it up by the 'air when we'd a-done ; and 'er cried again a drop or two for joy, and 'er throws 'er lill' dimply arms around my dirty neck, and 'er kisses me like . . . like . . . " but poor Jim's voice failing him entirely for the moment, he had to leave the simile unsaid.

" ' And Webb,' she say, as I was shoulderin' me basketful o' tools, ' if ever you runs out, or plays the dukes and drakes with a weakly restitution, and can't stand, and want new eyes, you come to me and I will tell God all about it as I did for Miriam.' "

" And wi' that 'er skips off like a deer.

" In less nor three months she was laid 'ere 'er dear self : only six she was : I digged 'er grave meself, and I sweared over it to give up goin' to the Public, and I made this 'ere bit o' writin' on the wall to mind me of it : and afore God, Missy, I 'ave kept it ! And now me eyes, they isn't what they was, sir—I tires wi' long standin'—must be near my time to run out too,

and I'd like me to lay 'andy to 'er so as we can go and ask Him both together like, when 'E comes to 'ear about it all."

Yes, it may be that some of the nestling swallows will not fly far !

CHAPTER IX

'RIA DANCES

THOUGH few persons appear to know it, 'Ria's name is Maria Jennings. She is a diminutive widow of about forty-five, with a "splodgy" complexion, light blue eyes, usually closed during conversation, with an inexhaustible tear in the corner of each; while a perennial smile exhibits a row of gapped, irregular, worn-out teeth. I fancy 'Ria is turning grey, but when all her hair is made the most of and secured with a bootlace, the knot scarcely exceeds the size of a chestnut. However, during all these years I have known her I have seldom seen 'Ria out of a sun-bonnet, even on Sundays. Her gait is shuffling and uncertain: she leans forward, turns her toes in, and is undoubtedly bandy-legged; while her long arms, out of all proportion to her body, hang listlessly at her sides. She is endowed with an unceasing flow of language, and if you are credulous enough you will be touched by hearing her excuse the many faults of Tommy, her only child, on the plea of his being "that simple."

Her voice grates and is very unpleasing, for it squeaks like a file which has lost its bite.

" Your son is not looking well, 'Ria," I observed to her one day.

" No, sir, 'e bin to the doctor, and 'e say 'tis the weather inside 'im."

" Oh ! Rubbish ! This lovely weather should do him good."

" Well, that's what 'e say : 'e 'ave a regular desease of the 'rometer."

" Of the what ? "

" 'Tis 'is throat, sir. Doctor 'e give it a name what I can't exactly say : my boy says it were the name of a gentleman in the Bible (terrible scholard 'e is for the Scriptures), but I knows it 'ad to do with the weather and the 'rometer ; and 'e say Tom must 'ave a tiddily operation for it."

After a moment's thought I had an inspiration —Aneroid !

" Was the word adenoids ? "

" That's the very spit of it, sir—but I forgotten it."

" Very well, 'Ria, I will see the doctor about it as soon as I can. But meanwhile I want to speak to you very seriously upon another subject. Several of the villagers have complained to me that two nights ago you were disgustingly drunk, and made a fearful scene in the village, swearing and

shouting for hours so that they could get little sleep. Now, if this happens again, remember that you will have to give up your cottage and leave the village. I will *not* have it."

" Now, sir, let me in just a minute : believe me, they'm onreliable. I ain't goin' to tell you a lie about it, for *I* got a character to lose if they ain't, and I'm tellin' you the exact. I took me one glass o' stout at the ' White 'Art '—one glass only—oh ! ah ! and a sippity-sip out o' George Pether's pint, so I did—and that were all I 'ad that 'ole night ! No—I'm wrong though, I 'ad two tablespoons o' spring water for to swaller a pill down, so I did : them was the only drops o' drink I went near that live-long night. No ! —wrong again I be—I mind now as I took some 'oney along o' me tea, and three cups o' tea, too, at six o' the clock : o' course I did. Not another drop o' liquid touched my lips that night, so strike me ! onless it were the dew o' Heaven settled on me lips and trickled in unbeknown, for which o' course, we'm not respondin'. And as for the swearin' business—I stood me on the pitchin's o' the ' White 'Art.' and the evenin' were that beautiful, I 'ad to let one afore I took me 'ome : but 'twas but one. I'm not denyin' it were a good one, 'cause my boy told me on it next mornin' ; and like enough it warmed up a

few o' the folks within reach, and made 'em feel the sheets was 'eavy on 'em: but 'twas but one as I let. I'd like to be 'troduced to the man or woman in this 'ere village as 'ave never let one theirselves. They'm all breakin' the last commandment in tellin' you about it, 'cause mine was one as they knows they can't beat, and that's the 'ole truth o' the matter: they wishes they could find its match, I don't doubt, but they got no gizzards! Now, sir, I do 'ope as you'm bearin' me no ill will for what I never done—'tis 'ard as ignorant folk should be wishful to do us an injury."

"I understand, then, that yours was such a good one that it took you several hours of the night to get through with, eh?"

"My watch ain't got no arms, sir, and 'is face isn't nothin' to speak of, so 'twould a' been difficult for I to be timin' it, yer see: but from what my pore boy—'e be that simple—telled me of it next mornin', it must ha' took several breathes I'm thinkin'."

She is an incorrigible rogue, and further argument would have proved useless: moreover, she and her son are really the village idiots. Everyone feels their bump of pity begin to operate when meeting with, or even thinking of, these unfortunates: but they are apt to become village nuisances, and then are an even greater

problem. So it was with 'Ria: her mental endowments being few, she traded upon the fact and deliberately set herself to compensate her lack of wits by calculated knavery. If a fool, her cunning made it nigh impossible to suffer her gladly.

Many complaints had already reached my ears. They related to the systematic robbery of hen-roosts belonging to a farm handy to her cottage: her making free with game in the coverts under pretence of blackberrying; the firing of three haystacks under more than suspicious circumstances: the mysterious disappearance of my own coal and coke, and the ominous shrinkage of others' turf-stacks: I say nothing of her being finally caught red-handed snaring my rabbits, under cover of gathering sticks on the estate.

By August things had reached a pass which admitted of no further delay: someone had to impress on 'Ria the urgent need of immediate reform, on pain of the charity, upon which she largely subsisted, being finally withdrawn.

It was the day of our village Flower Show, a great annual event, but not an unmixed blessing, and it was there that the woes of many were poured into my ears for the hundredth time in regard to 'Ria and her misdemeanours.

As I went the round of the tent ruminating on these things, it was as easy to pick out the prize-winners by their laughing faces as it was to detect the unsuccessful competitors by their comments and answers to sympathising pals, whose efforts to cheer them by dilating on the super-excellence of the prize exhibits only added fuel to the fire of disappointment. Thus :

Unsuccessful : " My kidney be-ans only 'ighly commended ! Look to that now ! Call that judging : I never come 'ere to be commended, and I won't be : there'll be some'at said about this, mark my words. Talk of kidney be-ans ! "

His pal : " Them carrots yonder ain't so bloody——"

Unsuccessful : " Oh ! bain't 'em ? I knows they be. But my kidney be-ans——"

His pal, reading the label : " My ! There's reddishers ! Tom Tramwell's, too."

Unsuccessful : " Tom never growed they, I warrant : 'is garden be a bed o' wireworm : pinched 'em somewhere—my plot like enough. Now my kidneys——"

His pal : " What price they tomarters o' Bill's yonder ? Show an eye 'ere, man——"

Unsuccessful : " I'm showin' two, blast yer ! 'Tis only to be expected as a man with a toomer on 'is neck same as Bill 'as should grow anythin' o' the same nature. Look to 'is gooseberries—

'tis all bush fruit and nothin' else as 'e can grow ; kidney be-ans like mine——"

His pal : " Garn ! Tomarters ain't bush fruit ! "

Unsuccessful : " Oh ! ain't they ? What is'm then ? Toobers ? Roots ? Forest trees ? I'm learnin' a bit o' gardenin' seemin'ly : ' 'ighly commended ' for kidney be-ans——"

His pal : " Strike me ! There's onions for yer ! "

Unsuccessful : " Nasty stinkin' things, too : only fit for ear-aches and 'arvest festivals. Now kidney be-ans——"

His pal : " Sight for blind eyes is 'Liza's bucket o' wild flowers over there : First Prize is right."

Unsuccessful : " Mostly overblowed ! But 'ow should a woman know to pick anything else ? As well put 'er to judge kidney be-ans——"

His pal : " 'Ave yer seen Jim Morkell's broad windsors ? "

Unsuccessful : " 'Ave I not ! Coarse and stringy —poor eatin'. I reckon 'bout as good as Mother Tritton's scarlet runners, what never climbed *'er* fence, I lay. If they'd looked at my kidney be-ans——."

But it was generally conceded that if 'Ria had showed everything she had stolen she might have taken all the prizes.

The flower-show day of hopes and fears, of joys and sorrows, of successes and of disappointments, was over, and in the evening I was called to an outlying hamlet. But poor Mrs. Perrot's baby was stillborn, and I left the doctor and nurse attending her. A lovely moon was rising and I took the short cut through the hanger and over the stream. After the busy day I found the woods refreshingly mysterious: man's hoarse comments were hushed, heaven was so much nearer.

In a small clearing at the fringe of the wood, and on the very bank of the burn, an unexpected and startling sight broke on my view. It was 'Ria in her sun-bonnet! With strings flying, a short clay pipe in her mouth, and with skirts held high, she was dancing a species of minuet: round and round she spun with clumsy agility. It was really amazing, and with great caution I got nearer to seek for an explanation of the phenomenon. Even as I did so 'Ria, tossing her pipe aside on the grass, accompanied a slower step with song. So far as I could catch them the words ran something after this fashion :—

"A moon-fairy be I, what rides acros't the sky,
And singles round the 'oodland glades o' night-time:
A dainty little thing, in cobwebs do I swing,
To kiss the moon when she be shining bright-time."

It was high time to make her aware of my presence. So stepping into the open I called gravely: " 'Ria ! " At that very moment a like inspiration, prompted doubtless by curiosity and annoyance at such unseemly intrusion, brought Farmer Transome's billy-goat into view on the opposite side of the opening : and, catching sight of him only, and hearing her name called, with one piercing shriek 'Ria dashed through the stream and was lost to view.

Picking up her clay pipe I resumed my way home to bed.

'Ria must be spoken to. That was my waking thought in the morning. As I approached her cottage a little before five o'clock, I could see her through the window sitting over the open hearth in company with two cats, a Belgian hare, and three white lop-eared rabbits. She was otherwise alone. I hailed her through the doorway.

" Good evening, 'Ria."

" Come in and please to take a seat, sir."

I accepted her invitation.

" I want to have a talk with you, 'Ria," I began.

She instantly gave me a keen searching glance, and compressed her lips in token of a mind quite made up as to her line of action. But so also was my own : it was to be a battle.

" First, let me return you your pipe," I said, holding it out towards her.

" Not mine, sir ; but 'tis a handy lill' thing for Tommy," and, taking it, she placed it carefully upon the mantel-shelf.

" Not yours ? Why, I saw you put it down upon the grass when you were dancing in Comesbury Ring last night."

" I never were out o' me 'ouse after six last night, sir—very porely I was wi' bad dreams in my pore 'ead."

" Now, 'Ria, listen to me : are these words familiar to you ? "

I repeated the refrain of her song.

" A purty little bit that is to be sure, sir, but I be no scholard for the po–uts, and p'r'aps 'tis as well, else I might fall into them terrible 'abits o' writin' books wi' no meanin' " : and catching the Belgian hare a rare bat on the head for nosing my boots, she added : " Be off, Sam, do, expectin' Brussels sprouts on a gentleman's legs. Grand day at the Flower Show we 'ad yesterday, sir ; I was——"

" Yes, yes, 'Ria : but now listen to me. . . ."

" Grand day it was, but misfortunately I never couldn't grow no flowers, nor vegetables fit for the showin' : pore Tommy be that simple : my garden been overlooked, nothin' don't 'pear to

prosper wi' it, nor wi' me. Me and mine been overlooked altogether. Sure as me rabbits is in kindle Tommy slides on 'em in the door-way; 'e be that simple, pore boy: me hens gets egg-bound: Jack the 'edge-'og is for ever sheddin' 'is birtles; all me chicks is took wi' the gapes and me ducklin's blased wi' the straddles. All the troubles as ever 'appened to pore folks is nothink to mine."

But having a private bill which I was determined to bring in, I hardened my heart and interrupted her.

"I am very sorry for your troubles, but now I want you to listen to me——"

"Pore Tommy 'e always say 'Remember Job's wife,' same as I always tries to be doin'. But all the evil come o' one thing, which I minded as I lay abed tormented in me 'ead last night: I were never churched after Tom was borned! No, I weren't. Seems cowardly to take and 'ave it done now—Tom turnin' seven-and-twenty come Michaelmas, but 'tis worth your while thinkin' over; things might alter, likely, if 'twas took and done."

"We will discuss that later, 'Ria: just now I want you to listen to me."

"I know 'twas my pore 'usband's death what disreminded me of it. 'E was a well-sinker, you

know, sir, and was to work down to ' Crosslands ' mendin' of a deep well, nigh the bottom : and Dick Tripper, 'is mate, feelin' a jerk on the tell-line shouts down : ' Be you in it ? ' and 'e say, ' I be in it,' so 'e winds up and 'e wasn't in it : so 'e shouts down, ' Be you there ? ' and 'e say, ' I be there ' : so 'e lets down the bucket again and says presently, ' Be you in it ? ' and 'e say, ' I be in it ' : and 'e winds up 'alf-way and the rope divides, and down 'e goes again : so 'e slacks for my man to splice the rope, and 'e shouts down, ' Be you in it ? ' and 'e say, ' For evermore,' and 'e winds up and 'e wasn't in it, and that's what 'e meant. That was the day I was to 'ave been churched, but in the turmoil 'twas overlooked, and everything's got overlooked ever since : me and Tommy conclusive."

" It is all very sad for you, but now listen to me——"

" O' course you can't say as Dick Tripper 'ad an 'and in it, yet you can't say 'e 'adn't : for 'e squnted terrible in one eye—t'other was a very good 'un, 'owever. 'E asked me to take 'im when my pore man was buried, but I thought better of it."

" Yes, yes ; now you keep quite quiet, 'Ria, and just listen to me——"

" I'm not against a pair o' odd eyes meself :

you can't 'ave everythin' straight in this world, and eyes is less important nor manners : or lips for the matter o' that, a top 'un wi' a plaquet 'ole, and what whistles, I never couldn't abide. I 'ad another chanst down to Stanley fair the year after ; a pig-drover what I knowed from a girl, took and courted of me as I set in the winder-seat o' the taproom in the ' 'Are and 'Ounds ' : and 'e say, ' You'm lone-like ? ' ' I ain't then,' I says. ' Don't you pert me,' 'e say : ' your man's gone and you'm lonely : I'll take yer.' ' Shucks ! ' I says : ' you can drive pigs, but you can't drive me.' ' Can't I ? ' 'e say, and lets fly at me 'ead with 'is fust, which went through the winder be'ind me and cost 'im three and nine, it bein' spuddled glass so as a body couldn't see into the back alley through it. If I'd took the biff square, and not dipped quick, Tom would ha' been a 'orfin. So I bit 'un in the leg and says : ' Proposin' to ladies is expensive,' and left 'im bathin' 'is 'and, and settlin' up wi' the landlord. Now what be you sayin' to the churchin' question, sir ? Should it be ? Or should we slip it ? "

" I think if I was in your place I should slip it, 'Ria. But now you really must listen to me——"

" 'Tis venturesome in you o' course, but I'll abide by your decision, and if there be any consequences I 'ope you will take 'em kindly. Nicely

that 'eap o' dung o' yours be 'eatin' against your garden pales! I passed down the land late last night, in an 'urry to get me 'ome, and it smelled somethin' beautiful. Don't be takin' no notice o' that, sir," as ominous thumps on a partition wall made me look round, " 'tis only Sam goin' up to bed, 'e sleeps along o' Tom: and by the same token 'ere is Tommy 'isself come for 'is tea."

A wicked gleam of triumph lighted her eyes as she rose:

" If yer must be gettin' 'ome yerself, sir, thank you kindly for callin', and all your beautifule words. We must face them consequences together."

My bill had been talked out.

CHAPTER X

CHURCH-BALLING

"I WONDER if you could explain me the law o' church-balling, sir ? "

This question came from a man by the name of Peter Austin, a retired seafarer and now Jack of many trades, chimney-sweeping included.

My friend Austin rejoices in the complexion of a mulberry, and is in everything of very free habit, as the gardeners say. His trunk is globular, and is supported upon short bowed legs clad in corduroy trousers of ample skirt which shade abnormally large feet. He has a clean-shaven, jolly face, like a moon at the full, and a snub nose : his head is bald on top, but a struggling growth of hair still makes the most of itself below. He never wears a collar, but in its place a bright-coloured scarf is knotted round his immense bull neck. One has to be very precise with Peter, for he gives the impression of being keenly on the alert to correct every statement, as he holds one with his piercing grey eyes. Somehow Austin seems to attract attention, perhaps owing

partly to his voice, which is a very pleasing bass and rings clear as a bell. He is a great devotee of the laws of the land.

" I wonder if you could explain me the law of church-balling, sir ? "

" It doubtless sounds very ignorant on my part, Austin, but I am afraid I never even heard of it : what kind of game is it in connection with ? "

" I thought 'twas a bit o' bluff meself—but it come about like this, sir. Last Saturday I were up all night wi' my sick cow, Bess, terrible job we 'ad too, she being due to calve down in a week. So my missis and me took and went to church Sunday evening, 'stead o' morning which is our usual 'abit : and our seat be in the very shadow o' the pulpit like. Now it 'appened as John Moore's son, down to Combes-Stay, limb o' Satan 'e is, sits next me on me port side in the pew. As soon as Parson Higginbotham give out 'is text, and I looks 'er out in me Bible to make sure she was there—she ain't always—I see the young radical playin' wi' a gutty-purky face off a cracker in one hand and a fusee match in t'other. So I says : ' You light that and I'll strike yer, mind ' ; and as 'e only put out 'is tongue at me I says again : ' S'elp me I'll clip yer 'ead if you try it on,' and my missus 'eard me, though 'er eyes was tight shut so she couldn't see the nipper's pranks.

" Next thing, being took sleepy, I 'as a doze. You knows Parson Higginbotham, I don't doubt ? No ? Well, no matter : 'e ain't none too brisk in the box ; moreover we 'ad a fall out at the vestry meeting back-along, 'e not being no scholard at the figures. Any'ow, I lost meself soon after 'e got going ; and all of a suddink some'at burnt I top o' me 'ead, and being a bit short o' 'air it did burn smartish : and afore I were fully awake-like, I'd seized me Book what lay in me lap, a terrible old 'un she is, wi' 'er brass furniture fore and aft, and I give John Moore's son a tidy clip o' the 'ead with 'er, saying, ' What did I tell yer ? I'll learn yer to set alight to decent folk at their prayers,' making sure 'e 'ad a'done me own 'ead a mischief with 'is fusee : whereas 'e 'ad done no such thing, being asleep same as me. 'Twere but a drop o' hot grease from the pulpit candle what was guttering in a draught : but quite a natural mistake anyone might a made in them circumstances !

" Any'ow, the boy jumps up and shouts : ' Who are yer gettin' at, Sooty ? ' and nips down the church, and out o' reach of a second dose o' them brass plates. My missus, setting starboard o' me, waked up same moment, sees me clip 'im o' the 'ead, and noticin' the gutty-purky face tumble out of 'is 'and on to the seat

when 'e flitted, she cries out ' Malchus,' my name being Peter, you see, sir, throws 'er shawl over 'er 'ead and moans something fearful. You see she took the gutty-purky face for the nipper's ear ! We all forgets ourselves in a way o' speaking : parson 'e loses 'is place in 'is book, a thing not uncommon, 'owever, and 'e knew well enough it wasn't worth bothering to find again, so he gives us 'is blessing to show as 'twas all over for that turn.

" But as I goes out o' the door 'e say to me : ' I'll 'ave you persecuted for church-balling.' That's 'ow it come in, sir."

Being thus put in possession of the leading facts, I explained to Peter the offence known as " Brawling," and its consequences.

" I telled 'im I was sorry," went on Austin, " and 'ow it all come about : but I met wi' 'im 'alf an hour ago, and 'e says : ' John Moore's son 'as developed the ringed-worm just where you struck 'im Sunday, Mr. Austin : it all come o' your church-balling,' 'e say. Now sir, be brass-plated Bibles catching o' the ringed-worm ? "

" No, but you should not go to sleep during the sermon, Austin," I replied.

" That be one moral, no doubt, sir, but whose fault ? I be mortal glad to know 'ow the law

lies on both counts: but whose fault? My cow Bess be barred, of course, she couldn't 'elp being dry on Sunday and she'll mend that by the next, but I 'ave my doubts about Parson Higginbotham."

CHAPTER XI

BEN BRINDLE DISCOURSES

BEN BRINDLE is our parish clerk and sexton. Hale and well preserved at threescore years and ten, Ben is quite a character and will tell you that he " has seen life in all her phrases " : consequently he is much reverenced as an authority on most questions in the village, being consulted on family histories and genealogies as an infallible authority.

This village luminary is short, squat, and almost dumpy of stature : his round baby face, very like that of a marmoset, is framed in side whiskers with a fringe of beard under the chin, more white now than black : a pair of the merriest eyes sparkle from under heavy eyebrows, and invite one and all to stop and gossip. He has a good-shaped head, which, as I know well, is full of memories. Ben is always neat in person and tidily turned out, and has a cheery word, ready smile, and kindly act for everybody, which makes him a general favourite. I hardly know sometimes how we should get along without Brindle.

Ben is a widower and makes his home with his married daughter, Selina Hobbs, whose husband works upon the roads.

This afternoon as I watched him cutting the grass in the churchyard, he took an " easy " to put an edge upon his scythe, in which operation the whet-stone slipping, he narrowly escaped a nasty gash to his hand.

" A narrer shave that, sir," he remarked, examining his thumb ; but being satisfied that no harm was done, in his relief he became discursive.

" Life be full of 'em 'owever," and he took a draught at the bottle of tea which Frank, his grandson, had brought him a moment before, " full of 'em," he repeated, as he wiped his mouth in his hand : " 'old up your arms over your 'ead, Franky, that's it ! See anything odd in 'em, sir ? " he asked, turning to me.

After a minute's examination, the only difference I could detect was that one appeared as if it might possibly be the smallest trifle longer than the other, and I said so.

" You 'ave 'it it, sir, that's one of 'em : now take and run 'ome to your mother, Frank : yes, there you 'ave 'it 'is birthright," he continued, following with his eye the retreating figure of the lad.

" His what, Ben ? "

" 'Tis easy explained, sir : his mother Selina is a vetinarian what eats grass-food like the animals, and so o' course is took full o' fancies at times. The night afore Frank was borned, she 'ad mislaid 'er watch and was terrible put about. ' It don't matter,' I says, ' 'tis a poor time-reckoner whatever ' : yet she turned quite rumpsy about it, and carried on such a piece o' work as never was, though she never found it till a week after. I quite expected as Frank would slip into this world wi' a row o' figures round 'is face, but 'tis a mercy 'e only got the two odd arms as you see. They do say as 'e'm terrible unpunctual to school, but 'tisn't 'is fault, as I tells the master, Selina's watch being what it was.

" ' No excuse,' say the schoolmaster.

" ' O' course it ain't,' I says : ' 'tis borned in 'im, part and parcel of 'im then.' Unmarried man what don't know life, is our schoolmaster. 'Twas a narrer shave for Franky : ' on the very rim ' as you might say."

Here Ben ruminated for a moment, whilst I said not a word to distract the current of his thoughts : presently he went on :

" And yet again I don't know but what the next one, Minnie, 'ad a narrerer : she was borned twenty-second day of June, and the same evenin' Selina,

all 'er vetinarianism notwithstandin', were took wi' a fancy for whatever would you think? A fresh 'erring for supper, with a Christmas cracker to follow. Now they'm both un'andy things to percure in summer time, and we give it up entirely 'avin' no shops to search through for 'em. But Minnie's all right so far, and turned seven already. 'Tis a great blessin', for theym full o' possibilities for the unborned is crackers and 'errings in June."

In the intervals of his munching a piece of cake, I also learned the following history from Brindle.

" See that mound, fourth from the right from my basket? Well, that were a close'ish shave, too. 'Annah Griggs' eldest son worked in a quarry down to Wishtown—two mile from 'ere all of it. 'E took and got too near a blastin'-charge or some'at, and was broke right up. Quite a job they 'ad, I understand, to 'arvest 'im. 'Owever, they put it all into a corfin, and Parson 'ad just got to ' earth to earth, ashes to ashes '—when Jim 'Ockley run up with a parcel : ' 'old 'ard,' 'e say, ' 'ere's some more.' 'Twas 'is right arm, hidentified by a dancin' girl tattered on it in red and blue. ' Gleaned it over an 'undred yards outside the quarry,' Jim went on, catchin' for 'is breath—' I 'opes it be in time, sir,' 'e say to

the parson. ' Lay it on the corfin,' says parson, and went straight on—' Dust to dust.' 'Twas touch and go, wasn't it ? "

As the clock was striking six Brindle began to collect his tools, but his memories of ' close shaves ' were not to be denied even at this late hour.

" I mind when James Worrell's wife were laid up wi' the newmonica, they took and moved 'er bed down into the kitchen for to keep 'er warm, and I called to ask 'ow she did one evenin', and was set down by the fire, and her littlest nipper Stephen, three years old only, 'e took and drunk out of a bottle o' stuff what was on the table. ' Oh, Master Brindle,' she cries, ' our Steve's been and took—Oh, my sakes alive ! ' and she 'ands me up the empty bottle.

" ' Poison,' I says, 'avin' snuffed it.

" ' Take and empt' 'im, quick,' she say.

" ' Mustard, prompt, be the only thing to save 'im,' I says.

" ' Ain't got a thimbleful left in the 'ouse,' she say.

" ' This will serve,' I says, pickin' up one of 'er dead poultices what lay on the floor : and I 'adn't 'eld it agin 'is face ten seconds, afore 'e was took vomitin' somethin' alarmin' !

" ' That was 'sauceful in you, Master Brindle,' she say.

" I suppose it were : anyway 'twas close enough to be almost ' in sight ' as you might say.

" And talkin' o' bottles and that—I don't suppose you ever knowed Sam Graves, did you, sir ? No, you wouldn't—'e went afore your time : 'e lays over against the vestry door out yonder, 'E was used to lend me an 'and a-cuttin' o' this 'ere grass, as 'e always said as 'is name implied as 'e 'ad a right to do. Well, 'is missus sent down 'is bottle o' tea one evenin', and the lad Jim Blake what brings it sets it down by the gate. Young Jim 'ad another bottle wi' 'im, and puts that down in the shade o' the lime trees and starts a game o' play. Presently, bein' taken dry, Sam looses 'is belt and sets 'isself down—a wonderful stout man was Sam what couldn't set with a belt on—and turns the bottle bottom up in 'is throat. 'E was one o' them overflow men what don't drive 'is liquor by swallowin', but lets it find its own way down all in a flood : there was such a plenty o' room in Sam's area, it was a matter o' no concern where it settled.

" ' 'Ere, 'old on, Master Graves,' shouts the nipper Jim, 'alf cryin' 'e was, ' t'other is your bottle, them be my tadpoles ! '

" Sam kneels up on 'ands and knees, and a terrible red eye 'e turned on the lad, what scared 'im so that 'e took to 'is lill' 'eels down the 'ill

'omewards. Sam spits a drop into 'is 'and, and there sure enough was a tiddly taddy. Gettin' up, and droppin' 'is belt in doin' so, 'e said several words as I won't repeat, and sets off down the road after the nipper. That *was* a race and no error! I don't know now but what Sam might a'catched 'im, but 'e blowed 'isself by talkin' so much as 'e travelled. Any'ow, round the corner just at the bottom o' the 'ill where the road do fork, who should 'e meet (and a'most run over) but the Parson and 'is missus: and what wi' 'im 'avin' to 'old up 'is breeches, and want o' breath, and churnin' up what 'e'd a' swallered, Sam took and done the best thing 'e could, gives the taddies their freedom in the middle o' the road.

" ' They ain't mine, ma'am,' 'e say, touchin' 'is 'at to the missus, ' they be Jim Blake's, all on 'em.'

" 'Twas foolish like, for they was as blind as moles both Parson and 'is missus.

" ' What are, my man ? ' says Parson. ' Ah, it's Sam Graves. I thought you were cuttin' the churchyard for me.'

" ' So I be, sir,' 'e say, ' but I couldn't do this 'ere there,' which was true in a way o' speakin', for it were the runnin' what finally done it, yer see.

" ' Very proper, Sam,' says the Parson, ' a very nice and proper thought: never play pranks in the churchyard. When you need a bit of fun or exercise, a game of 'ide-and-seek, or leap-frog, shall we say . . . yes, yes, a very reverent and careful thought on your part, Graves: above all I like to see you trying to bring up Jim Blake's young notions—oh, a very right and Christian feeling and example: I like it in you, Sam, and—and—good-night to you,' and they tripped in at the parsonage gate, leavin' poor old Sam mutterin' to 'isself, ' 'ide-and-seek! Leap-frog! Bringin' up Jim Blake's young notions——' and a good deal more as perhaps I'd best not repeat.

" But it was narrer, sir, that was—on the very boundaries in several ways."

Just as Ben ended this recital, there passed along the road on his way home from work, one Fred Prince, stone breaker and road mender; who, catching sight of us, paused to rest his tools on the churchyard wall.

" Well, Fred, and how is the world treating you? " I asked.

" Much as usual, sir, thank ye," was his reply, touching his hat. But Brindle could not let it pass at that.

" Much as usual, eh! 'Tis a man among

men Fred is then : 'e's 'ad a bit 'o luck 'as Fred " : and turning to Prince he added, " speak up for yourself now, come."

But Fred only smiled as he knocked out the ashes of his pipe against the wall.

" Well, Prince, I want to congratulate you, but I must know what it is all about : tell me."

But still I got no answer beyond a vacant smile.

" Now out with it, Fred, come," urged Ben again, prodding him with the handle of his scythe : " don't act silly : you'm sweatin' to tell it, I'll warrant."

However Fred perspired his only answer was, " G'arn, Brindle, 'oo are yer gettin' at ? "

In despair, therefore, Ben took up the history himself.

" 'E's not for tellin', that's sure : yet 'tis a bit as don't come everyone's way. 'Tis like this, sir. You mind 'is brother Bob ? "

" No, I do not remember ever meeting Bob."

" Oh, come, you must know Bob Prince, sir ? Brother o' Fred's. Bob, what come back from the Boer-land war, with a 'ole in 'is 'ead and three toes short on 'is left foot. 'E lived along o' Fred last eight years—you *must* know 'im ! "

" I assure you I do not : what about him ? "

" About 'im, sir ? Ah, well ! It 'appened like

this, then. Last Sunday, Fred come round to my place and 'e say, 'Ben, Bob 'ave been and stepped through the cow-cumber frame, and is took again: come on, quick.' Now I 'ave seen Bob in a smart few fits, so I 'urries down along o' Fred, and we found 'im in a rare takin' down the garden. Precautionary like, Fred's missus 'ad locked 'im into the occasional next the frames and the chicken run: but we soon 'ad 'im out o' there, and pops 'im into 'is bed and sends for the doctor. When 'e come Bob was a bit laxer, and the doctor chap 'e say as 'ow 'e'd best be took to the work'ouse 'firmary, and give us the paper. Yer see, Bob 'ad lived wi' Fred and 'is wife, and 'ad eat their victuals years and years, and it pulled their belly-strings a bit tight at times: we was all sorry for Fred, though we needn't a been, seein' what 'appened. Off I goes for a cab, and gets 'im in and drove nine miles to the 'firmary—me and Fred inside a 'oldin' of 'im. When we gets to the gates the orficer there 'e looks at the doctor's order paper, and 'e say, 'Pauper, um! Out ye get, *we* takes charge of 'im; and pays the cab. Slippy now, you two.' 'E didn't know what 'e was talkin' about: too free wi' 'is tongue 'e was. 'Owever, we says good-bye to Bob and gets out, and t'other 'e gets in: but afore they'd took 'im fifty yards along the

carriage drive, they runs the blessed show into a tree, the 'orse bein' took silly or some-at, and over-turns the lot. Bob 'as another takin', and when we come up 'e still 'ad 'old o' the winder strap in 'is teeth—dead as a maggot! A bit o' luck as ever was."

Turning to Prince, I said, "I am so very sorry to hear of your trouble, my man: but, Ben, I am afraid I do not quite understand——"

"Why, sir," he broke in, amazed at my dullness, "sure Bob was inside the sacred prestincts, and the 'House' 'as to bury 'im! Fred's all right!"

Then I saw the turn of luck and was satisfied.

"But 'twas as narrer as you often get 'em in this world," ended Ben; "good night, all."

CHAPTER XII

PHILIP CREECH'S " XPLANASHUNS "

I HAVE long since reached the age when it requires something rather urgent after dinner to drag me from a book and a comfortable chair at my own fireside. One evening, however, something urgent did occur, for Mrs. Creech of Hollowcombe Farm called and begged to see me. From her I gathered that her husband had suddenly been "ripped all sideways," and it was at his own instigation that she ventured to approach me at such an hour and ask if I would come and see him : at once, if possible.

Hollowcombe Farm is not so very far, being only about a mile and a half away, but is of difficult access, its only approach being a mud-track between pasture fields. It is a small dairy holding of some twenty acres all told, possessing an indifferent old house, now derelict, planted in eminently unsavoury surroundings. The residence and two fields were Mr. Creech's own freehold, the remaining ten acres he rented. The

farm is not actually in our parish at all, and my acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Creech had so far been of the flimsiest. But in face of such a message from her husband I promised to follow her in a few minutes.

Without any very definite charge against it, I had understood in a vague way that Hollowcombe was not quite as happy a household as most around us. The reigning Mrs. Creech, a second wife captured some three years ago and imported from " somewhere down Dorset ways," had not proved herself a worthy successor of the first. Rather undersized, with a sharp-featured peevish face, and washed-out, shifty, uncertain eyes which never met your own, Number Two was about fifty-five : of a flat, slatternly appearance and slovenly gait, she picked her way through life like an aged guinea-fowl suffering from chronic moult. Her " master " was fifteen years her senior and had seen better days both in his business, home and person. But for all that he was a curiously ignorant man, whose first wife must have been far the better horse and mainly responsible for such a measure of success as their small farm had attained in the past. She had presented him with three children, two girls and a boy, but all were now married and out in the world. The family were always traditional

Dissenters and one of the mainstays of the chapel " Bethel."

As it was a dark, overcast night, with only fitful gleams of moonlight between the heavy clouds, my walk was a somewhat unpleasant one through the winter slush. I got within ten paces of their door, however, without incident : but then I was suddenly attacked in a most cowardly spirit by an old grey gander and received a severe nip behind : distinctly below the belt. I tried to drive the bird away by every means I could think of, both persuasive and violent, but all to no purpose. At last it came for me with such ferocity and determination that I was forced to retire a pace or two : and the onslaught being repeated just as a dark cloud obscured the moon, I let out with my stick " at a venture," and, alas ! with too deadly effect. It smote him full " between the joints of the harness," that is, upon the head, and the next moonbeam revealed a corpse. This was a nice introduction to my prospective ministrations within ! But if I began to feel a bit anxious, this was soon relieved. In answer to my knock, Mrs. Creech opened the door cautiously, and asked through the crack if Simon the gander was within measurable distance of the pitchings, as he had but a few minutes before inflicted upon herself a painful reminder of his

enmity, as her shawl would testify. With many apologies I was forced to confess to murder, albeit quite unintentional, and pointed to my victim. Whereupon Mr. Creech's voice from upstairs demanded who was dead, for he knew of no one else but himself travelling that road at the moment.

" 'Tis old Simon," answered his wife : " 'e lays as dead as a brick."

And the reply to this greatly reassured me.

" And I'm sayin' ' Glory be ' for that. It's many a bite I'm owin' the old brute : a good riddance as 'e should go and die afore me. Come you up-along, sir, an you can see the stairs. Phebe, do summat and make a light."

He lay in a gigantic four-post bed which occupied the larger portion of the bedroom, and made a grotesque figure, with his head and face swathed about in a gaudy red and yellow handkerchief.

" 'Tis real kind in you to be comin' to our old place such a time o' night, sir," he began. " 'Tisn't as if we'd been at one in our worship, no, tisn't, or I'd rather say tabernacle, then. I allus attended Minister Pharoah Mitchell's Chapel up to Bethel, you know. But lor ! she'm emptied, for Phary's gone as dry as a tinder, rotten as a medlar, weared out same as me. 'E came in to

see me not but a few hours back-along, and e' say :

" ' You've 'ad a stroke, Philip Creech.'

" ' Aye,' I says : ' I've 'ad a smart few one way and another. You ask Phebe, she'm respondable for 'em mostly. Comes o' bein' fool enough to marry again—but there—you oughter know, you gotten y'ur third. They'm a parcel o' Psalm-singin' cats is second and thirds,' I says.

" ' You'm goin' over, brother,' 'e say.

" ' So I be,' I says : ' and the River's tricky. But there's ferry-skiffs safer than y'ur old ford. Better by 'alf be catched in a ship nor stuck in the mud. I'll be in sight o' dry land any'ow whichever side o' the water I be throwed up. So I'm sendin' for Parson to pilot me now, Phary. 'Tis a question o' wheels or keels, and wi' water up to y'ur neck I'm sidin' wi' Noah. That last discourse o' yours on Aaron's beard and the skirts of 'is clothin' settled me as you'm unsafe,' I says. ' Drippin' wi' oil from 'ead to foot, and 'im y'ur own fore-runner as you said, why, 'e might 'a been a figure o' fun for the fifth o' November, wi' 'is golden calves and that, no guide through deep waters,' I says."

I tried to direct his thoughts into more serious channels but he interrupted me.

" No, no, 'tis carnal advice I'm mostly wantin' :

t'other'll come when that's settled. My will needs a witness."

"Yes, quite right: but we shall want two, Mr. Creech."

"Never, for a tiddly bit of a thing same as mine be: but if you'm sure about it, I can send over for me neighbour's carter to-morrow, an I'm alive. But we'll risk it wi' one to-night."

I attempted to reassure him, for he appeared wonderfully vigorous and strong, but he was quite determined that he had only two days to live at the outside. Indeed, he had little desire to get better. I tried to explain the attestation clause of a will, but all to no purpose. Should I, then, start to draw up the will at once at his dictation?

"Bless you, sir, she'm settin' 'ere already," he answered, fumbling under the bedclothes: "and is only waitin' for y'ur name to warm 'er up like, and 'er'll 'atch off. I been sloggin' away at 'er all yesterday and to-day. My right 'and's all right for the writin', 'tis me left as 'ave left me, as you might say. 'Tis all as plain as plain. But you better take and read 'er if you'm doubtin' it. I can trust you not to say nothin' to no one of 'er insides."

When I assured him that I was safe in that respect, he produced a large sheet of paper from

beneath his body and handed it to me. Upon the outside was written " to be opend by my son nadab or i o my dortrs miriam or mary on the day o my deth."

Inside the wrapper was inscribed the following :

" to be put in my corfin and skrud down with me my first wifs wedin ring from my watch chan and the parlr rug mad o the skin o my old shep dog David. thes to be askd to my fewnral and teld as they as sumthin in my wil but wont an they dont cum."

Here followed a long list of names I need not repeat as they will appear in the clauses below. Within this covering wrapper lay a large envelope containing the will which was to be sealed down when it had been witnessed. This envelope was labelled " to be opend by my son nadab arftr i bin gravd and red by im to the kongregashun in my gardn an tis fine an tis wet in the kart shed."

As I withdrew the document the patient begged me to shut the door and see that the one at the foot of the stairs was also fast. When this was done he asked me to read the contents to myself. If I needed to put any questions, I must be pleased to speak in " whipsers " as Phebe's ears were long.

The following is a literal transcript of what I had to read :—

" my wil wishs and surmin to be red and pretched by my son nadab arftr i be gravd and dun with for wich e to be payd 5s. by my wif phebe and she to and im now 10s. cider money for my barers and £10 gravin xpenses £10 15s. in al out o er matrimony afor 'e reeds no mor. nabby you get it at wons ere and now if you reeds any mor with out it you forfits al yur legersee to the church my lad. phebe got lots wot belongs to we skors and skors o pounds."

At this point I " whipsered " to Mr. Creech for information.

" I don't quite see what fund your wife is to pay these sums out of. You say ' out of her matrimony.' What do you understand by that ? "

" Why," he replied, in some astonishment at my ignorance, " all my money and things she've took from me and my 'ouse ever since I married 'er. All she's made out o' me by makin' 'erself my wife. She thinks everythin' she can take and lay 'er 'ands to 'er can take and do what 'er likes with. You'm not knowin' Phebe, 'ow sharp 'er be at makin' everythin' 'er own. Terrible woman to be sure. You ought to a knowed my first : Phyllis were a wife to be proud of, good, 'oly,

'ard-workin', savin', just the diverse o' this thing. I 'ad a tidy bit, and was doin' well when 'er was took, poor thing: but Phebe 'ave just ruinated me right and left. I tell y' it gives me the fluke to 'ave 'er creepin' nigh me. Talk about a stool o' wickedness or the frost on the cabbages."

With that I had to be content, and, indicating in dumb show that I understood, I returned to my perusal of the will :—

" any 1 wat as a thin and aint ere at this reedin wont av it it goes to my neses glory parker and susan steevens arf and arf. i wish to pay all my dets in ful.

the ministr and ldrs in bethel.

1. my rasr and the par o pattns wat was my furst wifs is for ministr faro mitchell o bethel chappl.

xplanashun. fary theym both good for natchurl use but for you theym a speshul aglory.[1] stand em allus next yur bible on the table or lik absylom youm lik to be ung in the conseat o yur shiny wiskrs or get ard artid and bogd on yur last passage o the red se. wat with the remans o the flys and lis

[1] Allegory.

on im mind you and the murrans and boils only just eelin faro didunt find the goin by chariot gig as esy as e thort. so kut orf yur prid and stand i and dry in the pudls o temtashun.

2. the big par o bellus with a shel layd in on er belly is for gideon blake.

xplanashun. giddy you bin a brokn windid luk warm ladyosean ldr evr sinc i nod you. let the bellus mind you o yur want to blo yur ash into flam afor youm wayd in the gold skales and they spus you out to innom.[1]

3. my new billook is for ezekiel perrott.

xplanashun. zeek i swallerd yur tung and manrs for yers til they av blisterd my gissrd. the ares you av growd sinc you was a ldr pushin with sid and sholdr and tredin and fowlin the risin dew with yur fet av thind out bethel til tis lik a old edg. tak and lay em and bush the gaps or twil be to lat and al the kongregashun will wandr out to betr rivers and pastchurs as i dun and will be lthier for it but youm stil respondibl they left so larfabl thin mind you.

[1] Hinnom.

4. my adamanev druv out o edn in chiner up to the mantl shlf and my pigwip is for abinadab tripp.

xplanashun. binny youm a ldr mind. now koncidr. if you dont no ow to rul yur own ome ow be you to elp bethel. youm in danger thru yur wif. al nose it. tak and difend yurslf and stand furm afor worsr apns. lif be al driv or be druv tis our leson sinc edn and the giddyreen pigs.

my famly

5. my money wats left o it for my son nadab creech.

xplanashun. nabby you nose wer tis to. find as good a plas for it in futchur and dont let a sole no it. out o it you must giv £20 to each o my neses yur kusins glory parker and susan steevens.

6. my 2 fields and the ous is for my dortr miriam pring wed to a good man so er be.

xplanashun. mirry the ous be fare wartr tit but want elpin and pantin ere and there. my own grownd i dun wel, but you tak and sel it and you kan get a good pris for it. but on no akount tak on the rest o the land i rent tis a thurr bad lot. ungry and thirsty

ther sole fanted in em was rit on the fas o evry cattle i evr put ther.

7. al my krokkry and fernitchur not mentshund for others is for my dortr mary reeves wed to a good man so er be.

xplanashun. fernitchur inklud cow and 2 pigs.

the cow jael be a grand buterer but a sorey bit to the milkin. best sing er a chun as youm at it geroosIm the goldn servs as good as any but evn with that kep yur i opn if er katchs you napin er plays the jus with the buckit.

the pigs be lear and rachel for if 1 as to many and tothr to few theym both comin o a good stok and worth som trubbl to kep.

8. my 4 gees is for my nevew benjamin creech.

xplanashun. binny it aint wat we kal a mark o respkt but you av mad a lif long study o ther natchurs and no wundr with yur mothr as yur mothr and 5 be as many as yur oldin wil karry."

Once again I had to whisper: "How many geese have you on your farm?"

"Four," answered Mr. Creech—"no, three now, old Simon's dead o' course. So you've

got as fur as Benjamin 'ave you, sir ? Well, I must change that four and five into three and four tomorrer—or 'e won't see what I mean. You might take and do it for me now, sir, please."

widrs.

9. my parlr karpit and 2 new pars o pants for widr emly carter.

xplanashun. emly the flor o yur cotage tis wet the kors o you sufrin from kold fet and you got no 1 now to charf em for you. the pants ave nevr bin on. theym mans o kors but at yur tim o lif sext be just vanity.

10. the sid o bacon wat i curd last feberry is for widr lizzy pitts.

xplanashun. lizz you chews the rit 1 ther be 2 but the 1 wat phebe kurd ad best be berryd. smel em and youl no oos wich. min be nis and fat and i sen sum tim as yur teths nothin but reeds shakin in the wind.

11. the dubbl sofr bed is for widr kate truscott.

xplanashun. kate tis a fashionable bit with lots o thins so you best go thru it tim and agan. last tim i ferruttd er we ad 2 rats and a ibbit.[1]

[1] Lizard.

othr frends

12. my gun is for my godson joseph collins a good strate lad so e be.

xplanashun. be karful kors er andls loos and shem a bit spitful with er eels but er never xplodid as yet and god stop er startin on you.

13. al the dung on my plas and 2 for prongd forks is for charles crutch.

xplanashun. on kondishun charlie you furst clens out the sesspit for my dortr mary reeves and kuts al the mors[1] out. an you dont lik the job glory and susan my neses pokerts the dung.

14. my turf stak is for rhoda mutters.

xplanashun. rhoda i nose you suffers from kold but ther be a aglory in the stak for you as wel. turf's be just rotn erbs and wen dry be fit for nothin but the fire. but wons lited tis ard to put out. cow dung be the sam. tho you sets by the dor down at botum i sin yur devoshuns up to bethel be wundrful mild just lik yurself mutters. rotn erbs they be fit fur nothin but the fire. tak kar the old devul dont set a lit to em ther be no telin wer twil stop and you as dry as a

[1] Roots or fibres.

stik. rhoda in the book was set by the dor to arkn kors er wud do nothin els so youm a aglory to yurself outsid the stak an you ad the sens to se it. wen er arkd twas no good wantin devoshuns to no wat to do next.

15. the det o £6 wat bin owin to me by george marley for 3 yers for ay wat i soled im is for jim brace.

xplanashun. jim youm just lukky no okkashun to be i and liftid up about it for you gets this det only kors i nose no 1 els as kan sques it out o georg oo as ad it to long.

16. my birdclock is for fred luker.

xplanashun. if the kookoo be tok corfin ovr is tim oil is string tis stif and to be ovrmindid o the flit o tim revolvs sain and doin thins wats bad for the sole.

17. my ferrutt is for tom drummett.

xplanashun. is nam be agrippr and e allus smelld lik el the kors o is boltin the vermin so terribl quik. they fornose em comin. and e evr gets liteddid at nit. tak no notis o both trifls.

18. the bras warminpan is for eliza trott.

xplanashun. liza tis a unlukky pece fit only for dekorashun. she meltd the air

kushn wat was undr my granfather and smelld im out o the bed and left 3 sinders on arnt anns rit leg the nit er died. be karful.

19. the larg bible with bras lips and my cider pres is for jehonadab toucher.

xplanashun. my vews o the 2 sillyst errers if they baint the 2 onreliablst liars in the bok i men mefusilla and recab be rit in the fallow around jeremiar 35 together with the best reseat for makin cidr win.

20. to my wif phebe. we bin wed 3 yers but adnt bin 3 ours afor the botum fel out o the bargin. the mischief-arm you dun me then to now be unkountabl paul isslf karnt rekon it and i aint goin to try and mak a dikshunry o it ere. you ment to ave your phil and av ad most o wat e ad. I nose morn you thinks. you must a layd a prety nest eg agenst my deseas. but my gold watch and phylliss 3 broochs and the 2 silv spons you sharnt kep. the porn tikits for em in yur nam be in this will enverlop and nabby wil and em to jo trimble oo wil se you redem em for im out o yur matrimony or persekut you for a rubr. if my phyllis ad evr set iis on you i must a lorst er earlier.

you brort nothin but trubbl into this ous and i tak kar you karry nothin els out with the xepshun o thes legerses from me namly wesleys misshun ymn bok with our marrag lins in er the framd piktchur ovr the dressr o the proddiggl usks and my nale sissrs.

21. I must lay next phyllis.

the rim for my gravestone to be
phyllis filld
philips kup.
phebe spilld.
philips up.

22. my god this be my cignatchur philip creech.
adres oller kom. okkupashun diin."

On seeing that I had read to the end my friend on the bed began to ask questions.

" Now sure you'm not thinkin' she wants y'ur claws to 'old 'er down ? An I took and fixed 'er wi' a bit o' cord and a smidge o' seals wax—I don't doubt you got some about you, I mean when you've put y'ur name to 'er o' course—she'm fast enough, eh ? "

" Yes, the clause is still necessary, and unfortunately I don't as a rule carry sealing wax," I replied, as I refolded his remarkable piece of work. " Farther, we must have a second witness, who need not read your will if you object."

" Oh, well, 'tis a easy trouble. Me neighbour's carter-man'll be workin' near 'ere tomorrer. But another's worser, I can't get me out o' bed to 'ide 'er from Phebe : and I been thinkin' you best take 'er 'ome in y'ur pockert, and come up wi' y'ur claws fixin' 'er tomorrer, and I'll get carter Tripp in 'is dinner hour twixt twelve and one, an that suits you, sir ? And fetch a lump o' wax too, please. You see, my son Nabby be comin' up next day and I can 'and 'er to 'im then."

And so it was settled. And that's how I came to make a copy of the will before returning to Hollowcombe the following day. There everything was at last satisfactorily got through, the document re-signed and dated, and witnessed by myself and the carter, the only difficulty encountered being over the signature of the latter, whose hands were as hard and unwieldy as slabs of oak. Handling the pen very much as he would a hoe, he attacked his job with the same energy as he employed hoeing turnips and perspired freely over such an unwonted task. Indeed, he entirely destroyed four nibs whose points fled about in all directions, and inflicted several severe wounds through the paper ere he got " Tom Tripp " inscribed.

It is now no breach of confidence to disclose the contents of the Creech " surmin," for all

this happened years ago, and both Mr. and Mrs. Creech have long since been " gathered." The will became the common property of the " Kongregashun," but even by them it is now probably almost forgotten.

CHAPTER XIII

THE KEEPER'S CATCH

SOME months ago in the winter my keeper, James Brace, came and asked leave to take out a summons in a case of poaching. It appeared that whilst on his rounds the previous evening, he had come across a man lying at full length upon the ground and peering over the edge of a deep quarry, obviously watching for his ferrets. Several bolt-holes were netted, and other evidences of the man's craft lay beside him, but no rabbits. So dropping quietly behind some whin bushes, under the impression that the poacher was not aware of his presence, Brace decided to await events. Unfortunately a heavy mist came up from the sea very suddenly and obliterated everything. When it lifted, half an hour later, the man had disappeared.

Could he identify the culprit? Yes, without any doubt whatever, though neither he nor the poacher had spoken a word. Brace was absolutely certain of his man, and could swear to him in any court in the land.

" We must be sure of a conviction, Brace, or it's worse than useless to follow up the case. You say you have no other witness : and from what you tell me, I fail to see how you can identify your man and satisfy the Bench."

" Well, I can. 'Tis like this, sir. Blanketed as I were in that fog, I daresn't move : 'twas too dangerous, I thinks to meself, not only for me, but if I pounces on 'im 'e might easy slip over the edge too. As 'e 'adn't seen nor 'eard me (or so I thought) I makes up me mind to wait and chance it. But settin' there if I wasn't seein' anythin' I were listenin' : and sure enough, though I never 'eard 'im leave, I did 'ear twice over all I wanted. P'raps you'm not knowin' it, but there's many 'ereabouts as does, and 'is wife complained to me about it only the week afore she died. From time to time 'e do make the most audacious noises of 'is insides, like as if 'e'd took and swallowed a policeman's rattle. Shouldn't wonder if 'e wasn't threatened with the apprentices.[1] When I 'eard that call I knew my customer."

" It won't do, Brace. I'm sorry—but no Bench can be expected to convict upon such evidence ! "

" Very good, sir," replied my keeper, " though I'd like for the magistrates to 'ave 'eard 'is

[1] Appendicitis.

orchester. Any'ow, let 'im wait : once I gets a 'old on 'im, I'll 'ug 'im what 'e'll remember. 'Tis Dan Knight, sir, o' course."

Though ignorant of his ventriloquial eccentricities I had felt sure of it. A thorough rogue was Knight. In consideration of his father, a former keeper, having been shot at a tenants' shoot many years before my time, Dan had been granted a life tenancy of the old house up in the woods. But his knowledge of wild life, coupled with such unique opportunities as his cottage affords, rendered him a terrible thorn in a keeper's side. I had warned Knight half a dozen times already, but had found him a man of unbridled temper. His physical powers were contemptible, but as if to compensate for this, being convinced of the efficacy of vicarious virtue, he married a woman of more than ample proportions, who at the time of her death weighed nineteen stone. Knight lived in the reflected glory of Laura's gifts, and considered for some curious reason that he should be regarded as someone in particular.

" I'll catch him yet," said Brace.

May, the month of beauty and blossom, and cricket, was with us. Our Cricket Club held a meeting at which it was decided to open the season,

on the 10th, with a match between an eleven picked from members over thirty, and another from members under thirty. The only difference of opinion evinced arose over the precise designation by which it should be advertised. Someone was greatly in favour of " Seniors *v.* Juniors " : a farmer advanced " Horses *v.* Colts " : and a facetious choirman suggested " Days and Moments." But in the absence of unanimity, and as being of small importance, the matter was ultimately left open.

The day of the match came at last. The sky was cloudless, and the air full of scent and song as I walked to the cricket ground. A refreshment tent, to act also as a pavilion, had been improvised of rick-cloths. From the school, forms had been requisitioned and were fast filling with onlookers of both sexes. Under a pair of elm trees a brace of ancients had long since ensconced themselves and, with a private cask of cider and a quart tankard between them, were prepared to make a day of it.

Presently the players straggled on to the ground in twos and threes. The " Over Thirtys," or " Horses " were for the most part marked by an open disregard for any special " get up " for the contest. Farmers wore their Sunday hard felt hats. The publican had donned his riding

breeches. Labourers were in their ordinary corduroys. Brace, the keeper, concealed his splendid physique in brown knickers and a khaki shirt, but shed his velvet coat. Only two appeared in a complete outfit of flannels. The majority realised that to win would entail hard work, and for that they felt best prepared in clothes to which they were most accustomed. With the " Under Thirtys," most of whom were under twenty, or the " Colts," it was a somewhat different story. They had been on the look-out for any advantage which might secure them the backing and admiration of the crowd. Four profited by the Jumble Sale, held a week before, and availed themselves of costumes which lent a spot or two of colour, and afforded an adequate background to their prowess—to wit, four suits of my old pyjamas. That they realised these were likely to prove breezy habiliments so early in the season was proved by the fact that in every case the striped flannel was reinforced by their working trousers, and only served as the thinnest of veneer ; so transparent, indeed, that the grain and pattern of the groundwork beneath were plainly traceable. In emulation of this display Dan Knight approached me, and in an aside begged for the loan of some suitable and distinctive coat in which to " count the pennies," that is, to occupy the

post of umpire, to which honour he and Ben Brindle had been elected. From my cricket bag, whose contents were at the disposal of members on such important occasions, I produced an old Leander Rowing Club coat, which, though several sizes too large, more than satisfied his jealousy of those in pyjamas.

The admiration of the maidens for these gorgeous swains was unconcealed : the smiles which played upon their ripe red lips and glittering eyes spoke volumes. But as the Colts practised with bat and ball, their costume served to excite a deal of good-natured chaff. " Bowl us down one, Stripy " : " Whoa ! Zebra, don't y' kick " : " Give us a taste, Edinburgh Rock " : and in allusion to the brass buttons on my Leander coat, " What cheer ! Skipper Knight, 'ow's the weather ? " As he wore none, the keeper was hailed as " Braces."

Youth won the toss : but for some unfathomable reason he put Age in to bat first. Whilst Youth ranged himself about the field, each selecting a place to his liking without any reference to the bowler, it was suddenly discovered that the provision of both scoring-book and scorer had been overlooked. But Brindle, the sexton, ever prepared for all emergencies, promptly produced a blank page from a disused Baptismal Register :

and the schoolmistress (coached by several lads on the bench beside her) offered to score. Knight adjusted the bails and took up his station. Brindle at the bowler's end, produced a new ball: and two veterans advanced to open the innings.

Nothing of great importance occurred till the telegraph, chalked upon a blackboard from the school, registered twenty runs for the loss of five wickets. But at this point I was made aware of a violent altercation between the scorer and her satellites, and drew nearer to ascertain the cause. The last batsman was given out L.B.W.

"I shall use no shorthand in my report," was her firm reply: and she proceeded to write "Elbow in the way." The next run was given by the umpire as a "leg-bye," the meaning of which was explained to her.

"Nonsense, boys, nonsense! I just happen to have been watching myself, and I distinctly saw the ball strike him on his—his—well, we will put down, 'that part of his person which, in his bending posture with his back towards the pavilion, was most prominently exposed to the scorer.'"

It seemed that the register-leaf would not suffice for such graphic details: and when I suggested that I should relieve her of her arduous duty, she gladly accepted, explaining as she

resigned that in the bowling analysis the M's in black pencil signified Maidens (or ones who had not been struck), the M's in red pencil stood for Matrons (or those who had suffered punishment).

The Horses were pulling evenly if slowly, having made thirty for six wickets : but even so they appeared to Knight to be doing over-well. This misfortune was aggravated by the fact that in stealing a short run, Bartlett, a batsman wearing spikes, overran the wicket and trod heavily on the Skipper's toe. Now Mrs. Bartlett tenants that cottage whose drying ground adjoins the cricket field. Moreover, it was she who nursed the celebrated Mrs. Knight, and took in part-payment for her services that worthy's night-dress, which at the moment was bellying in the wind upon the line. This outrage offered Knight a chance of reprisal for his wound, as well as an opportunity for the assertion of his dignity. So the game was suspended while he called Bartlett's little son, Robert, from among the spectators, and shouted across the field to him :

" Go in and tell your mother to take that thing off 'er line. 'Tisn't 'onest nor yet Christian to purposely mislead decent folks into believin' as she could fill it. Not another woman in the parish could do that outside my poor wife : and as for

your mother, she'd be lost in one sleeve of it—so she would."

The last three words were edged with a vengeful look at Bartlett, who, however, took no notice beyond punning " poor little Knight's shirt ! " And the game was resumed.

The score was standing at thirty-six for nine wickets when Brace was called upon to go in last man. Disdaining the pads and gloves pressed upon him—terming the former " coward's cupboards," and having no use for the latter since " I'm not going to church,"—Brace moistened his hands in the approved fashion, and seizing a bat walked to the wicket. But there his stance was so unusual (his bat was held over his shoulder like a gun) and his general mien so threatening, that the youthful bowler having delivered the ball, promptly vanished behind the umpire for protection, just in case—— There was no need for this : the ball had already left the field for six. Off the next one Brace scored two. But in gathering himself together to eclipse, if possible, both these successes in a mighty effort at the third, the bat escaped his grasp and hurtled through the air in the direction of long on, and losing his balance he brought down wickets and wicket-keeper in a sorry heap beneath him on the turf amid an uproar of applause.

Thus the Horses' total stood at forty-four.

It was now the Colts' turn : and one gathered their confidence of an easy victory by such audible comments as :

" If we'm not good for four apiece, must be a poor crew." And again, " Jim Bradworth's like enough to mow the lot wi' 'is own scythe."

As the preparations for their attack proceeded, one noticed that the Horses' tactics differed somewhat from those recently employed by the Colts. For instance, they selected bowlers of medium pace rather than those boasting fast reputations. But then the pitch was fiery and wearing very badly. They also dispensed with a wicket keeper, regarding the office as open only to an attitudinarian : they had no use for such, and relied on a longstop known to everyone to be a deadly shot with the ball, and who, even should he miss the wicket, would undoubtedly imperil the limbs, if not the life, of any batsman taking liberties.

The innings opened somewhat doubtfully, from want of practice, but by slow degrees the Colts amassed a promising thirty-eight for six wickets. But this was in small measure due to luck, or to more than one doubtful decision given by Knight, who was quite determined that Youth should win. Was not his son Jim among the

prophets? And had he not broken the laws of cricket by "'avin' five bob on?"

For instance, on one occasion, the brothers Tim and John Collet were in together, and Tim impulsively called John for a run. Cover-point neatly gathered the ball, and throwing down John's wicket, appealed.

"In for you, John," declared the Skipper, "you'm doin' very well. But I wouldn't 'a been so blasted sure an it 'ad been Tim; 'e'm riskin' the game and we'd be better wi'out 'im."

Another time Knight called "Over."

"Well, all right," replied the bowler, "but I know I've only sent down three."

"Aye," said the umpire, "and 'ave 'it 'im somewheres in 'is body wi' each one, ain't yer? D'yer want to kill 'im? That's no cricket. 'Over' I say, and if I say 'tis 'over,' so 'tis."

Knight knew he was safe; respect for any decision of the umpire was the one principle of the game I had successfully instilled into everyone at Hawkescombe.

Excitement was now growing apace, and the betting got fast and furious. In our Club even umpires in such a crisis were not debarred from expressions of their sentiments. Brindle audibly prepared a grave for the recipient of every ball: and Knight had serious fault to find with each

successful piece of fielding. The twin spectators under the elms with their tankard of cider, vociferously applauded every few moments without prejudice : what they applauded they knew not, both having long since passed the stage of focussing the game.

But now, with no addition to the score, the Tea Interval was suddenly announced by the ringing of a bell : and a very full and heavy meal of cake and quarts of tea was stored away by everyone.

With the game resumed a bad rot set in among the Colts, two more wickets falling for no runs. Eight for forty ! The ninth man cut a ball for two, and surely the plague was stayed ; for a few minutes later, his partner, following suit bravely, lifted a loose ball into the elm trees, which rudely roused the slumbering brothers. With one consent both fell across the precious cask, whose safety in this hour of peril was their only thought.

But with the next ball, No. 9 was clean bowled. Nine for forty-four. A tie ! And one more man to bat. But time was running a bit short, as it had been settled by the captains to draw stumps at six-thirty. Some minutes elapsed, but at last Jim Knight, now the sole remaining hope of salvation for his side, stepped slowly out of the pavilion in response to various appeals from the field to " hurry up." But a Knight was not to be

hurried by anyone, and to simulate a calm which he was obviously far from feeling, Jim halted again, half-way on his journey to the wicket, to re-tie a bootlace. His batting partner came out to meet him with a whispered counsel and, on parting, emphasised it with a pat of encouragement from his bat. That was the beginning of disaster. Those pyjamas, pink, and blue, and chocolate in stripes, which made Knight beautiful, were very weak. I knew it: and at the piece of pleasantry with the bat they melted like a Neapolitan ice, and a streak of several inches of corduroy disfigured his seat.

Nothing daunted by this contretemps (duly reported to him), Jim prepared to deal with his first ball as a half-volley: but realising in it, very late, the deadly yorker, he dropped so clumsily upon it that the handle of his bat got badly mixed up with the flowing girdle of his colours. His combined exertions to right matters and keep on his feet resulted in a sad extension of the wound from hip to knee.

Excitement now was absolutely at fever-heat, the tension well-nigh unendurable. Men's pipes were resolutely laid aside upon the benches. One veteran had even forgotten to wipe his heavy beard since that last attack upon his tankard, which remained poised in his hand half-way from

his mouth. Maidens clasped each others' hands, and every movement in the field was hailed with little screams of nervousness. Knight was badly fidgeting his pennies : and even Brindle had begun to hum the chant for the ninetieth Psalm.

Double honour then to Jim that his deshabille flapped unheeded, and that he punished the next ball as it deserved. The full pitch to leg he got " well on the meat," and hit it all he knew. But it chanced Father Knight was standing in the way near square leg and, at his elbow, Brace was fielding. Unable to avoid that slog, the Skipper received the ball exactly amidships and doubled up. In an instant, before he could unfurl, Brace, stooping like a peregrine, seized him and lifted him off his feet, baby-fashion. Pressing him together like a concertina, with his head between his knees despite his furious struggles, Brace called upon the field to hasten to his side. In the space of half a minute the entire company of spectators as well as players had gathered round. Commanding several on his side to lie down flat upon their backs with hands in readiness, the keeper shook the umpire, saying, " Now, Master Orchester, where's my quarry rabbits to, eh ? " And, having hugged him, he next proceeded steadily to unfold his victim inch by inch, until at last the ball dropped from the creases of

his coat into eager hands below and Ben Brindle, overcome with joy and the humour of the situation, decided that the catch was held !

" So 'tis a draw after all said and done seemingly : couldn't be more evensome ! "

" You lost us the match, dad," remarked Jim to the Skipper in the pavilion.

" Match be d——d," was the heated reply. " I lost five bob on it ! And I'm doubtin' there's a whole bone in my blasted body. Sakes ! That Brace 'e'm mighty—a'most the match o' me and Laura ! "

CHAPTER XIV

LETTY'S WOOING

PROBABLY one of the best-known figures in Hawkescombe was Letty Marchant, for her cottage stood at four cross-roads, two of which are highways with a considerable stream of traffic : the other two being more in the nature of accommodation ways to farms, and steep at that. From its situation her house was called " Broken-way." Here Letty was ever to be seen sitting, in the summer under the shade of her porch of honeysuckle, and in winter over the fire, her door wide open, making lace with her cushion and bobbins. Like a spider she had chosen an excellent site for the webs she was ever spinning : as good a trap to catch the passing traveller as could be found, and she did a thriving trade at times. In addition to her skill in making she got occasional good commissions for mending and cleaning valuable old pieces of lace, which required the greatest care and thorough knowledge of the material.

Another big asset on her side lay in her great personal charm. At the time I write of she was a buxom woman of forty-eight, with a full, jolly face and clear skin, dark eyebrows and hazel eyes, and, what is always so becoming, prematurely grey, almost white, hair waving in the daintiest of ripples on her forehead and over her ears. Yes, Letty was attractive without a doubt: few passed her without a second glance and then they were undone. Her smile almost compelled an inspection of her wares, which in turn was succeeded by an irresistible temptation to purchase a memento of "Broken-way."

Strong as her face was in character as well as in comeliness, Letty had one great weakness—I ought, perhaps, to say a penchant, or even a virtue—no one might have thought of associating with her, and that was dancing. One could never visit a fair within reasonable distance without finding her hard at work near the band or musical merry-go-round, for she always prevailed upon some farmer or milkman to give her a lift thither, and to do this was regarded by them as rather an honour than otherwise, since Letty was always excellent good company. At our parish gatherings and annual garden party to the villagers she was the gayest of the gay; presenting herself

at the Manor well before the time, and starting off with the band, she danced with the abandon of a dervish till ready to drop. Dancing is, of course, one of the great pastimes in Somerset, and very beautifully and gracefully the country folk do it, young and old alike : it is born in them, and they delight in it. But there was one curious thing noticeable about Letty which marked her out among all the other performers : she never took a partner, but danced hour after hour alone. One reason of this lay in the peculiarity of her steps, which few, if any, of her neighbours cared to master. They appeared to be a species of horn-pipe, or something in the nature of a cross between that and a Highland Fling, requiring no small art and perseverance in their execution.

But there were deeper virtues in her than dancing. Wise in counsel, and sound in judgment she was a Mother in Israel : " Letty thinks this " : " Letty says so-and-so," always counted for much in Hawkescombe. Being kindness itself, ever ready to do anything for anyone, and remarkably motherly with children, whom she really understood, Letty was universally popular. And yet she had always struck me as being a somewhat lonely soul. As with her lonely dancing so in her life, I somehow got it into my

head there was something missing, something wanting. Were all the men in her youth fools ? Or where is the unlucky one who lost her ? Questions such as these would puzzle me. Perhaps I did wrong, but it was not really idle curiosity only which made me try at one time to ferret out her history on the quiet. I gained nothing for my pains, or nothing of interest. All knew her forbears several generations back. An only child, she had gone out to service as a girl ; and when her parents died had returned to the old home and taken up her mother's trade with the lace.

As I knew she was always delighted to see me, I used to call on Letty from time to time and have a " tell " : yet I never left her cottage without feeling there was something wistful in her goodbye. Poverty as a cause was certainly ruled out. Till the war she seemed to be one of those, and they are not few with us, who possess means of subsistence from a private store of legacies which are hoarded up and passed on down the family and are known to few outside near relations. Banking is distrusted : paper money and cheques are often steadily refused : cash in gold and silver coin is the only recognised currency and is hidden away at home : the marvel being that these folk are not oftener robbed. The possessors are very

careful of their hoard: the knowledge that it is there is in itself both meat and drink in the security it affords against old age or sickness, a wedding or a rainy day. But it has to rain hard before they dip into it.

However it may have been of old with Letty, the pinch of recent years very soon clutched her hard. Lace-making without a regular clientèle is but a precarious livelihood at all times: and dependence on casual sale, however good at intervals, was soon out of the question for Letty with no tourists or holiday-makers of means upon the road. Farther, the cost of material rendered any profitable selling price prohibitive excepting to the very rich, of whom the high-road past Broken-way could never boast many, and the passing few now passed no longer. I had this all in my eye and often thought of Letty, even venturing once or twice to ask if things were difficult. She always passed off the question with cheery optimism, till at last one day she asked to see me, and begged me with many apologies to buy the very lovely length of lace which she produced. Its market value was far beyond my means, and so I offered to try and sell it for her in London.

"She been made a year or two and bain't new: not to say new, then," she explained:

" but I rather 'er didn't go off up England way—an you'm forgivin' my daring to ask you, sir."

" Wait a moment, Letty," I said, " and I will fetch my wife and see what we can do."

When we returned I did not miss the handkerchief she thrust so quickly out of sight into her pocket, nor yet the loving way in which she handled the lace for our inspection, her eyes dwelling on it with a wistful reverence, making it plain that she was only parting from it with the utmost reluctance. Yet half its value was as much as we could afford, and I told her so.

" I'm taking it very kindly an' you'll give me that, sir ; 'twould make a pretty wedding present for one o' your young ladies, now."

" Ah, Letty, you must not tempt my girls into hasty weddings even to secure your lovely work."

" Well—maybe 'tis better than tarrying overlong, sir," sighed Letty, " maybe 'tis ! "

I laid the lace aside, but her words stayed with me, they might mean much.

Months went by and nothing happened : but then like an avalanche events tumbled over one another in bewildering disorder. When returning home one afternoon I thought I would call at

Broken-way and beg a piece of string for my armful of flowers gathered on the hills. But as I passed the window and peeped in I changed my mind, and went on my way with lighter heart. There was that within which must not be disturbed ; a man with his back to me had been very busy holding Letty's face in both his hands and kissing it as only one who loves knows how to kiss, and the face he kissed was speaking volumes.

Then three days later, as I lay hidden in a wood watching my birds, who should come along and sit her down against the bole of a splendid beech, not ten yards from me, but Letty with a bundle of sticks she had been gathering. Whilst wondering whether I should give up my job and carry them for her, or whether her gallant knight would make his appearance and do so, I overheard her say, speaking to herself :

" I 'ad to sell 'er—yes, I did—so I did : well, well." And again : " I was bound to, you see—yes, I was—so I was."

And then before my mind was made up she shouldered her faggot, which was none too heavy, and was gone. Had she meant the lace, I wondered ? and was far from happy.

Next day, when returning from taking service

in an outlying hamlet, I saw ahead of me, in a narrow lane little frequented, a sight which made me pause and seriously question the evidence of my senses. For there was Letty with someone, unmistakably a sailor, whose arm was unmistakably as far round her waist as it could get. Things were indeed moving apace, and I hurriedly got me home by a short cut to avoid overtaking that leisurely pair.

Whatever could it mean ?

In another ten days came our parochial garden party, and for the first time in its history Letty was not with us. It was, of course, remarked upon by all, and troubled me so much that the following day I hurried up to Broken-way. She received me with as bright a welcome as usual, but quite contrary to her habit was sitting indoors, with her back to the window, doing nothing.

" No, sir, no ; I'm not feeling meself. Truth is I'm in trouble ; yes, I be. I missed your party yesterday by being to the 'ospital : but I'll take it kindly an you say nothing to no one about it ; no, please ! 'Tis me eyes, sir. I've a dark time coming. Doctor 'e summed 'em up very poorly, 'e did. ' No more lace work for you, mother ' ; them was 'is words then. Mustn't never go nigh it again. There be a carrot-tack [1] in me eyes

[1] Cataract.

what'll kill 'em—put the light clean out—so 'twill—yes, 'twill ! Can't think whatever I'll do."

And then I learned that Letty, too, could cry.

I tried my best to comfort her, but my heart was sore. And two days later I took her down to Exeter myself, but only to hear the verdict repeated. She had cataract in both, but when " ripe " there was every hope of a successful operation. Meanwhile, she must make no more lace, the strain was too great. The prospect for poor Letty was gathering darkness, and she was all alone.

Four days later, with many wild schemes for helping her coursing through my mind, I was again approaching Letty's cottage, when its door opened and a man came out, who hastened to meet me. He was a tall, well set-up young fellow of some eighteen to twenty years, with a frank, open face and jolly, boyish, irresponsible manner. He seemed to know me and asked if I were Mr. Percivall. When I said " yes " he became communicative and very confidential. He talked about himself and Letty, who it seemed had been his nurse, his " Nanny," as he called her. There had been enduring affection between them and he knew her story. I learnt the truth that no one at Hawkescombe had ever known. Letty, twenty years before this time, had fallen in love

with a sailor called Jack Mason, who got into trouble of some kind and bolted off to sea. She had proved faithful as a hound and had never given up hope. It was he who had taught Letty her strange outlandish dancing, and yet it seemed, or so my young friend told me, that when Mason had come to see her a few days before, she had sent him away, as he put it, " with a flea in his ear." The boy was sorry for her, though he appeared a flighty enough young fellow and let me into his own private affairs. He was about to marry and Letty years ago had promised to make a length of lace for the wedding dress of his bride. He had spoken of this, and somehow, he did not know why, Letty had broken down. As he spoke poor Letty's tragedy became plain to me. She could not tell him about her eyes. She could not pain one she loved and spoil his new-found happiness. That was Letty all over; surely, surely! And as for that length of lace, did I not know what had become of it? To think she had been compelled to sell it!

Before I parted from my talkative young friend I found out where Jack Mason lived at Watchet, and as I went home I said to myself:

" I can spin webs on my cushion and bobbins as well as you, Letty! "

Next morning I had out the car, and without much difficulty ferreted out Mr. James Mason, at Watchet, and to my untold delight found him as jolly a British tar as one could wish to see. Holding out my hand I addressed him somewhat familiarly :

" I see you've forgotten me, Jack Mason ? "

His eyes pierced me through and through, and removing his pipe he expectorated freely before answering.

" Never seen you in my life as I knows, sir—but we'm meetin' such a maze o' folk during the war, can't keep alongsides of 'em."

" Ah, but I've seen you, Mr. Mason."

" You've my name right enough, I own, sir, but where was it you seen me ? "

" At a place you know. I saw you with a friend of mine."

I approached a seat, but he stayed me with a heavy hand.

" You sit there and your tale's like to be refined to one perigraph of pain ! They only swarmed this morning ! "

And then I saw that the seat I proposed to take was a swarm of bees boxed. Under his guidance I took another and he sat beside me.

" Well, sir, where was it ? And 'oo was that friend of mine ? "

" I live at Hawkescombe and so does Letty, Mr. Mason."

His brain was slow and for a moment he fixed me with a glaring eye. Then he roused up wonderfully.

" You've not forgotten her already ? "

" I never forgotted 'er and besides——"

" Letty is a wonder, Mr. Mason. I heard, not from her, that you once loved her."

" Once ! "

He fairly shouted it.

" Then you still love her ? "

" If you'm knowing Letty Marchant and can ask any man that ! Well, 'tis like asking ' D'ye like 'oney ? ' There's only one answer, ' Give me the spoon.' But she turned me down, sir."

" Did she ? Are you ready to do everything for her as if she were a baby ? She is crippled, Mason ! "

" Crippled ! "

He held out two hands like a brace of hams and said :

" They'm good for two, I'm thinkin'—bar the lace ! "

" Never any more lace, Mason. Letty is going blind."

It seemed to stun him and yet——

"God's truth, sir! But she'm not missin' much in not seein' me, so long as I can get a look at 'er. Is that why—— Oh, sir, 'ow did you take your bearin's? You're dead sure she—she cares still? Did she say so?"

"No: that would not be like her, would it? Letty wouldn't take you because she couldn't face being a burden to you: and she couldn't tell you because her poor heart was too sore, and you didn't coax her enough. You want to be very gentle with her: for I'm sure she still loves you—I found it out: Letty wouldn't let a man put his arm round her waist——"

"'Old on, there! What d'you know about 'er waist?"

"Not so much as you do, Jack! Oh! I saw you not very long ago in a lane at Hawkescombe. And she still dances alone, and practises hornpipes——"

He rose from his seat.

"When I've washed meself I'm off to 'Awkescombe, s'elp me! But so be there's any ogus-bogus about your story——"

And he made for the cottage. I called after him:

"Put in a shave while you're about it, Mr. Mason! There's plenty of time, I've got my car

up the road, and your chin might hurt poor Letty."

" 'Pears to me you've 'ad some practice yourself, sir : you'm well versed about it all," he said with a grin as he disappeared.

An hour later, as we were nearing Hawkescombe, I said to him :

" I want your help, Jack. Give this little parcel to Letty for me, will you ? "

I gave him the lace done up in a packet and he pinched it doubtfully.

" Shrimps, sir ? 'Ow d'you know she'd like 'em ? Seems to me you'm knowin' a wonderful much about my Letty. And 'oo shall I say they was from ? "

" No, it's not shrimps : and she will know whom it's from without waiting to be told."

" Good job they bain't shrimps, sir—an they was, I'd a took the liberty o' pitchin' 'em out o' the car. I got prawns for 'er in my pocket : they'm better nor the shrimps. But I'll see 'er unpack the parcel, and if there's notes in it I'll take care of 'em for 'er."

And he gave a jealous look at me which augured well. Then, with a parting injunction not on any account to put my parcel into his pocket for fear of spoiling the prawns, I dropped Jack opposite Broken-way.

And that's how we lost Letty. But I still get our honey from Jack Mason: and, as I write, we are waiting for news as to the result of the operation.

CHAPTER XV

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

IT promised to be "an old-fashioned Christmas." After a slight fall of snow, a steady frost had set in on December 16th: everything was ironbound, dry, and crisp underfoot, with cloudless days and wonderful nights.

How should we entertain the school children? The discussion in our household lasted the best part of an evening, each fresh suggestion being in turn worked threadbare and ultimately for some good reason discarded as impracticable. We were driven at last to fall back upon a Christmas Tree. After all, the children had not been treated to one for eight years past, and it solved many difficulties. The day's shopping this would involve was hailed by my own children with the keenest delight, and a list of all in the village was immediately compiled. Against each name a present suitable to age, sex, and taste was duly inscribed, and finally the wherewithal was promptly demanded from the exchequer of the

manor. Arrangements for the tea were comparatively simple and could be settled by consultation with the cook and village baker.

But there was no time to lose, if the entertainment was to be on the only possible day, Christmas Eve. And why not make a little departure this year, and do without a Father Christmas? Let us weave a little story to be recited to the revellers, to the effect that, although he had prepared the tree and presents, yet, owing to increasing age and the extreme cold, he had been forced to send one of his fairies to act as Almoner. But who should be the lucky fairy? We were all too big or too old. Why not one of the school children themselves? The suggestion required careful weighing in all its bearings, but finally with one consent Victoria Gray was voted to the throne, the only pity being that, in place of the time-honoured golden hair and blue eyes associated with the character, Vicky was as dark as a plum.

Personally I took a peculiar interest in this child. Her mother, whom I had never known as intimately as I did most of the villagers, had died some two years before, and during her last illness had begged me to keep, when she was gone, an eye upon her children, two boys and a girl, but especially on Vicky. Their father was a

pensioned soldier who lost his left hand on active service, and now worked at hedging and ditching and road repairs, using the hook which had supplanted the absent member with such remarkable dexterity that he is familiarly known as Hooky.

On his wife's death Hooky's sister, a woman of some sixty years of age, came to keep house for him. Aunt Caroline, commonly known by her wards as Cribby, had done her best by the children. But beyond the housework her success had been only partial : she never had, and never could, understand children. Her vocation was unquestionably cabbage-pickling, which she did uncommonly well. I was always fond of all three bairns, and saw from the first that Vicky was the least understood by Aunt Cribby. She was at this time just eight, and in her way really a beautiful child, with a distinct suggestion of gipsy strain somewhere. She had fine, healthy, splendid limbs, an oval face of olive complexion, masses of dark hair, and great lustrous brown eyes with long black lashes and beautifully pencilled eyebrows, rosy, dimpled cheeks, and the sweetest mouth and lips. In school Vicky attracted your attention at once, in that (and for this all honour to Aunt Cribby) she was always spotlessly clean : moreover, the bloom on her cheeks never seemed

to rub off with soap and water and give place to that polished apple-skin appearance of so many laughing faces seen there. In repose her expression was one of refinement seldom met with among the working classes: and though her dialect was "Zummerzet" to the backbone, it was pronounced with a richer and softer intonation than is commonly the case. But her nature was one which required study and care. Winning, tender and motherly to the infants, whom it was her delight to take charge of and pilot to and from school: quick, handy, and ready in the home: trim and neat in her person, and generally painstaking in school, some might be tempted to mark her down as a "goody-goody." Far from it: she was very easily and quickly roused, and then those great dark eyes were shot in an instant with burning fire and dangerous passion, vengeful and savage as a lioness. Add to this that she was by nature daring, self-willed, impetuous, and brimful of mischief as she was of life, it was no great wonder that Vicky was often in trouble. Whilst acknowledging that she had brains and abilities beyond the average, her teachers and elders were often baffled by these seeming contradictions of temperament. In too many cottage homes there is only one standard of conduct to which all must conform, if they would be saved;

only one method of assisting them to attain it; and only one arbitrary rule by which all are judged. To these all the children are submitted, to be perfected or ruined as may chance, and the regime obtaining at the Grays was least suited to dear Vicky. More than once I had been invited by Aunt Cribby to see if I could "make anything of Victoria to-day, she'm in one of 'er standrums": and I must confess that upon the last occasion I had had a stiff tussle to straighten out her path of duty to the chick. When my sermon was done she said point-blank, looking up passionately into my face and clenching her little fists:

"Why don't you take and beat me, and 'a done wi' it, eh?"

For answer I took her gently on my knee, and asked:

"Would you really like *me* to do that, Vicky?"

Then she broke down hopelessly, nay, hopefully! and it took me longer to comfort than it had to scold. That I had won a real victory, and that she was now truly fond of me, was proved the very next day: for on meeting me in the lane, she dropped me a curtsey, and with a pretty blush proffered a wisp of newspaper containing the last bull's-eye in a melting condition, which I accepted

and popped into her own mouth. I had known it : all she craved was to be loved—it was her life !

Next evening, after a hard day's shopping for all of us, Vicky was asked up to the Manor and entrusted with our great plan. Father Christmas had already left a tree full of presents, but his presence must be excused, and he had left instructions that she was to be his appointed Fairy. Nay, he had even provided clothes all ready for her part. Vicky's eyes grew larger and larger, till she bubbled with delight.

" And did 'e bring my present too wi' 'im ? "

" Of course," said I, " but you must not see it yet. Your first business will be to give all the others theirs, and then yours will come. And it is most important that the whole matter is kept a dead secret, Vicky. Not a hint or a wink to any single one of the others ! The invitations will be all over the village to-morrow, but you are the only one who will know what is in store."

There is nothing appeals to a child like the honour of participating in keeping a secret ; and Vicky expanded to twice her size when the box containing her outfit (as packed by Father Christmas) was produced, undone by herself, and the gorgeous robes tried on. The daintiest of muslin ballet-frocks spangled with gold and

silver stars : white tights and satin shoes with jewelled buckles, a wand of surpassing beauty, and a pair of gauze wings of marvellous delicacy and splendour, brought tears into her eyes. The necessary alterations and fittings were all marked with pins : and in a couple more clandestine visits and lessons of an evening Vicky was word-perfect in her little recitation, and with some coaching as to cutting off the presents from the Tree, reading out their labelled names, and presenting them with true fairy's smile, all was at last in trim !

Christmas Eve had come, and the great event was timed to begin at three. The final fitting-on was just completed by my girls at twelve o'clock, and Vicky had to run off home to get her dinner, and then come back to the Manor to be dressed. I saw her out at the drive gate, and stood watching her flying like a bird some hundred and fifty yards up the narrow lane, sunk between high banks, to where it bends. Surely God never made a sweeter thing than Vicky !

Then suddenly my blood froze and with one final thump my heart stood still. The awful thing was all over in a moment. Just as she reached the sharp corner, a runaway butcher's cart dashed round it and there was no refuge

on either side. Mad as the horse was with fright, he instinctively tried to avoid her, but the wheel caught her, and passed right over the little body. Next moment the cart and horse were over against the bank. I ran and stooped over the poor mangled bundle : yes, yes, her face was not hurt, but oh ! the ghastly colour, the sightless eyes, the blood ! I had no time to find out if she was dead or living. It was not above a quarter of a mile to her home : so bidding the butcher's lad, who had now reached the scene and had righted his horse, to drive fast and send a wire to the doctor, I gathered up the senseless form as gently as I could. Thank God, I soon felt the little heart beating, and a gasping breathing, which encouraged me, though I knew the greatest care was needed not to jolt that broken frame. What a fight it was along the slippery, frozen road !

Not until I had seen her laid in bed did I dare to leave her. But as she was still unconscious, after telling Aunt Cribby what to do, and what not to do, in my absence, I ran home to arrange for the Treat to proceed without me, and to collect a few things I knew would be wanted for her nursing. Half-way back I met the doctor and took him up to the bedroom, to find the patient had now regained consciousness, and that her one cry had been for me. Had she known

that I had carried her there ? I hardly think so : but would to Heaven I had not left her even for that half-hour, for I very soon gathered that Aunt Cribby, by way of consolation, had not only predicted the worst in the child's hearing, but was already searching through the house for scraps of mourning.

Dr. Mansell made a prolonged and careful examination : and then bandaged and swathed the tender body. I dreaded the verdict to be given downstairs, but all he could tell me was that so far he had found but three ribs fractured, though what internal damage there might be it was impossible at present to say. He would call first thing next morning : meanwhile she must be kept absolutely still. Then he said to me :

" This is another case for you. I leave her in your hands ; I believe it's her best chance. Get her to sleep if you can, and keep that tiresome woman out of her sight."

" Tell her yourself, doctor, please," I whispered. And very firmly he bade Aunt Cribby keep the cottage quiet, and on no account was she to let anyone go into the sick-room unless I called for them.

" Mr. Percivall is the only one who understands the case " (how I wished I did !), " and if you want

me before morning send a messenger, I know you have no telephone in this benighted hole."

When I went upstairs again it was nearly three, and the Treat would soon start. By the time I had arranged the room and set handy everything I might want, it was growing a little dusk and dear Vicky begged me to come close to her so that she could feel me. I knelt beside her bed and wondered at the mystery of child-suffering. To the end of my time I shall not forget those hours of watching, for every moment of that night is graven on my memory. Can I ever forget her laboured breathing, her sudden sobs of pain, and then, despite tears of agony, the bitten lip of courage. The hot little fingers crept over my face to make quite sure that I was there. Again and again she begged me not to let Aunt Cribby come near her.

" I don't want to die, sir, and Auntie said I should ! but I won't, no, I won't ! "

When I could control my stupid voice I tried to speak soothing words. The smell of eau-de-Cologne mingled with the reek of smoking candles and a villainously trimmed lamp oppressed me. During those long hours I counted the missing knots of the floral pattern on the faded counterpane, and cursed the hideous paper on the walls. Upon them hung an awful carica-

ture of Lazarus waltzing out of his grave in a winding-sheet, and opposite, the Impotent Man, with a dragoon's moustache, pointed heavenward with a wooden leg at the Angel playing a penny whistle and descending to Bethesda to bathe.

Everything I could I did for Vicky, who was so brave and good and trusted herself to me as if to a mother, but my hands were often not very steady. Fortunately the house was still at last, and when Hooky and the boys were in bed, few passed down the road in the crunching snow. And so the long hours went by, till the silver moon looked in through the lattice to give us her blessing, and then passed on and left us.

Towards ten o'clock I saw a change. After doing everything I could to relieve and comfort her—it is such offices which keep one going under the strain of nursing our loved ones—the hardest work of all was to watch in impotence as the precious life fluttered to and fro, searching for some home of safety. It seemed as though it could find none in that burning house of her broken body and yet could not finally make up its mind to escape for good. Vicky's fitful minutes of rest were now broken by random talking, now by convulsive starts : until at last she begged me to hold her in my arms. When I passed my right arm under her shoulders so that her head could

rest upon me, she seemed much happier, and the horrible refrain : " Oh ! the horse, the horse ! " grew less frequent. But I began to be afraid : those eyes, larger than ever and unusually bright, did they always know me ? There was a greater love than mine ; ought I to fight so hard to keep her ?

" Brave, my Vicky : brave, little woman." " Of course I'm here : no, never leave you." " Yes, quite comfy : I love to hold you." " Yes, we are both going through it together." " The pain so bad ? I know : so is mine, darling—but it's going to get better." " No, not a bit : pinch me as hard as you like, it always helps." " Wipe them again ? No, let them come : it does us good : see, mine are wet, too." " Feet so cold ? Let me rub them. Oh yes, I can find them ! " " And now this medicine. There's a good girl—you swallowed splendidly, without a choke. Of course you shall come back again on my shoulder."

I said a hymn or two which I had heard her repeat in school, but for the life of me could not get some of the verses right.

" I'm not gettin me well for the Treat, Mr. Percivall. Will the angels be getting one, think ? But they'm avin' Father Christmas, sure to won't want I, will 'em ? "

" Yes, He wants you, dear Vicky. He loves you better than any of us do."

I sat with her for five nights. Sometimes she spoke to me sensibly, sometimes her brain wandered through happier fields of delirium. She talked of her little friends and then, leaving me, spoke to them directly as if she were with them. She saw the Christmas Tree and played her allotted part a hundred times. In her fevered wildness there was joy too : she gave away the presents she would never give. To Betty Manders she gave a trumpet, to Grace Drummett a doll. For George Pether there was a mouth organ, and Tommy Hoskins had his monkey with chocolates inside it. To a dozen others, named again and again, she gave what was destined for them, and for herself at last, if I caught her words aright, it seemed a child had come, The Child Himself ! She cried out :

" Mr. Percivall, Mr. Percivall, whatever, ever, ever, will us do ? We've forgetted 'Im ! There ain't nothin' to give 'Im——"

" Kiss Him, Vicky, kiss Him," the words slipped from me involuntarily. And then those dear soft arms were held out and thrown round my own neck—the burning lips wandered all over my face.

" Help me carry these sacred kisses pure and holy till I can render them to Thee, O Lord."

And even as I prayed, the tender hands relaxed, the tousled head fell gently on the pillow, the knitted brow and troubled look of pain faded, and I watched the first real, contented smile come to that loving face, till, with one long sigh, my Vicky slept.

CHAPTER XVI

THE INEFFECTUAL TRAGEDY

A FEW weeks ago placards were posted at various points of vantage in the village announcing " A cheap excursion. Twelve hours at the seaside for 3s. 9d., return fare." Beyond remarking how disfiguring they were to the landscape, I thought little of these advertisements, it being unlikely that they would affect our folk, living as they do so far from a railway station. But one night a late ramble showed me that I had been mistaken.

The day had been too hot to allow of any more exertion than revelling in the shade, but the evening was too delicious to remain indoors: so after dinner I went for a walk. The nightjars, corncrakes, and owls beguiled me into prolonging my ramble till I found myself passing John Turkey's smithy just about midnight. Here I was surprised to find a donkey tethered, and near it there was a patient pony, harnessed in the shafts of a cart, fastened by a halter to a staple in the

wall. Bestowing a pat upon each of these in turn I was just passing on, when John, peeping out of his doorway, caught sight of me and beckoned me quietly to his side.

" Another bit of work for you, sir, in there," he began, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the forge : " they'm got in a terrible muddle from what I can make of it."

When I entered the shed it was ringing with well-known voices ; all there were talking at once and scarcely noticed an addition to their company. It being quite impossible to hear anything in the pandemonium, John called for order by stamping with his wooden leg upon a cracked metal spittoon, at the same time rattling a pair of heavy tongs upon the anvil and bellowing :

" Now then, now then ! quiet ! All please set down : gentlemen may smoke if it 'elps 'em to keep their tongues at 'ome."

" Setting," however, proved somewhat difficult upon the furniture of the forge, and necessitated forms, stools, blocks, and a variety of improvised seats being brought in from the yard and out-house.

The moonlight streamed in through the un-shuttered windows, and with the aid of a few candles impaled on nails in the walls, I was able

to take stock of the motley crowd. It was a weird enough scene. I noted Sam Barter in a high-crowned haymaker's straw hat, with a white puggaree hanging down his back, and Matilda his wife near him with her best bonnet sadly askew. Mr. and Mrs. Keitch, both looking worn out and wildly dishevelled, were close to Ben Brindle, the sexton, while 'Appy, with a bright red and yellow bandana handkerchief twisted round his head turban-fashion, sat by Peter Austin, who was bearing himself with an air of some importance. Not far from them was Louisa Knibb, whose toilet left a good deal to be desired: it had plainly been over-hastily put together.

Peace, and a certain quality of rest, being secured, John began by addressing me.

"Fact is, sir, there's been a most regrettable haccident: not to put too fine a point upon it, 'Ria 'ave been drowned in the sea to-day. But what be the rights and wrongs of the story I ain't yet 'eard meself properly. You've took it on yerselves," he continued, now turning to the company, "to come 'ere, all of yer, to ask for advice: so if you want it, I propose you put this 'ere gentleman" (indicating myself) "in the chair, so to speak, and let 'im ask the questions

'e may think fit ; and that all the rest of us should address ourselves to the chair only, as is customary at a hinquest, to which after all this is a kind of 'hearsal. Then per'aps we may get some sense of it all, and be in a persition to do some'at."

" 'Ear, 'ear," came from several voices as John sat down, and Mrs. Keitch observed to her neighbour : " Wonnerful clear-headed man is John when things is puddled."

" Great is Diana of the Ephesians," said Mrs. Knibb.

I felt obliged to assume the office thus suddenly thrust upon me, and began by addressing the first figure on my left, Ben Brindle.

" Now, Ben, my man, you start and tell us all you can from the beginning."

And he took up his tale readily.

" There was a 'scursion—we all see it by the posters sticked about—twelve hours at the sea to Sefton Sands, starting from the Town station at 8 a.m. and leaving Sefton again at 10 p.m. Several of us was infected for it : a good chanst for an outing a'fore 'ay 'arvest, cheap and that, so we took and 'ad it. By ' we ' I means all of us as sits 'ere, 'cept Louisa Knibb (what we took and called for on our way past 'er 'ouse 'alf an 'our agone), to fulfil the last rite but one."

" Bear with one another's burdens——" began the irrelevant Louisa, but her quotation was rudely strangled at birth by a lunge from John's artificial limb.

" All of us, plus the one 'oo is no longer tabernaclin' with us, met at the station to a tick. Levi give me a lift in 'is milk-cart——"

At the mention of that all-too familiar word, Mr. Keitch began casting furtive glances around in search of a pail.

" You fold yer 'ands," rebuked his spouse, ever on the alert, " and keep your eyes upon the gentleman, do."

" 'Appy come on 'is own : I don't know 'ow Peter Austin come——"

" There—scratched 'is 'ead off ! " exclaimed that worthy. It appeared that he was merely apostrophising a lamed match with which he had been attempting to light his pipe.

" Mr. and Mrs. Barter come in their own lill' gig. We most filled a railway carriage, and nothin' of importance 'apped on the ride down, unless it were that 'Appy cast 'is straw 'at in a tunnil, through puttin' 'is 'ead out o' the winder, 'is pipe drawin' too free of a sudden : 'twas a narrer shave, that was, a'most ' against the bricks ' as you might say."

" A good 'at she was, too," interjected 'Appy, with a melancholy shake of the head.

" I 'ardly knows what a Corowner would bring in," said Peter Austin, interrupted by cries of " Order, order."

" So Peter, what's 'andy wi' such things, tied 'is red and yellar kerchief around 'is 'ead in a turbine, which 'Appy 'ave a-worn conspicuous all day. When we gets to Sefton Sands we troddles about mostly in a bunch, the deceased showin' no signs or symptoms of anythin' unusual so far as I can mind. 'Bout twelve we mostly give evidence o' feelin' lear, and agrees to take lunch all together on top of the clift."

" Oh, my dear me ! what a climb that was : my poor shins," remarked Mrs. Keitch, amid new cries of " Order, order."

" We found a nice lill' patch, snug and lew, and all set down on the spine[1] pic-nac fashion, and divested the baskets."

" My meat pastie were sopped in cider what 'ad runned out," sighed Mrs. Barter.

" 'Twas warm up there——"

" Lumme ! it was 'ot—beg pardon all," said Peter.

" It wasn't till Mrs. Barter started to dig about herself, and Sam say ' seems like a case of the biter

[1] Turf.

bein' better bit,' as anything went lipsy like: but then she suddenly woke to it as she was set on a colonial of flying Emmas.[1] 'They'm eatin' my very chemise,' she say, and upsat several things in gettin' on to 'er legs. 'And my blessedness! look to your whiskers, Barter,' she say. That scattered us, the only one what finished 'is meal peace-able bein' 'Appy.

"It seemes as it divided us into three parts—pos'tives, comp'ratives, and superl-atives—what 'eld theirselves together the rest o' the day. The pos'tives (what knowed they was badly bit) bein' Mrs. Barter and Mrs. Keitch: them retired at once to leeward of a whin-bush for revenge. The comp'ratives (what was only inquisitious arter 'em) bein' Mr. Barter, the deceased combed 'em out o' 'is beard wi' a jam tart, the last thing she done, remember——" (this with a searching look at Sam, which, however, was lost upon him as he was far away in a brown study) "and Mr. Austin and meself, what 'unted 'em on one another. And the superl-atives (what was imperious to their bites) bein' Mr. Keitch, 'Appy, and the deceased.

"People mostly divides theirselves up so. I mind thirteen years back-along when the measles

[1] A colony of flying ants.

was so thickly our way, Selina's youngest——" It was seen that Ben was becoming ruminative, and he was interrupted by cries of " Order, order." " Chair ! "

" Thank you very much, Brindle," said I : " your account has been most lucid and helpful. I would now suggest that you all divide up, and sit in the three groups Brindle has indicated, and in which, I understand, you spent the remainder of the day, in order that from each we may next get an account of their time. Barter, Austin, Brindle, that's right, sit here : Mrs. Barter and Mrs. Keitch together, next : and Mr. Keitch and 'Appy last. Now we are in order."

Mrs. Knibb attempted to attach herself to each company in turn, only to be asked every time to " Move on," till Mr. Barter made her duty quite clear.

" Bein' a neutral you must set with yourself, Louisa."

She eventually did so, making Biblical quotations, which seemed irrelevant.

" Now suppose, Mr. Barter, you tell us as shortly as possible what happened to your party during the afternoon."

" Well, sir, takin' it just as it come—as we'm

forced to do this life—Peter Austin voted for a visit to the fishin'-smocks, and we 'ad a tell wi' some o' 'is old pals as was set round the Quay lookin' at nothin', the sun bein' that powerful."

"And the evening and the morning was the next day," said Mrs. Knibb.

"I didn't think they was very brisk, and 'twas a dangerous locality near the edge. Call it 'the slips,' don't yer, Peter? Any'ow, I took a journey o' three yards or thereabouts on one 'eel, owin' to a cod's 'ead layin' about."

"Phew!" said Ben Brindle.

"You filled your bottle at the 'Goat and Compasses' next, Sam," said Peter Austin.

"Oh! Did I? Very like. Brindle say a turn in the cemetery might liven us up a point."

"I knows a smart few there, sir, that I 'adn't seen for three-and-twenty years," said Ben Brindle, "and I likes to reckonise 'em when I can."

"We approached it in a tram-line (little thinkin' 'ow close the cemetery was approachin' one o' us) and walked around and around."

"Oh my dear me!" said Mrs. Keitch.

"That day they compassed the city seven times," interjected Louisa Knibb.

" 'Avin' peered about there (there wasn't much movin' as I see), we took and went back to the 'Quarium where everythin' moved. Felt quite oncertain on me legs to see them fishes weemin' around in their glass dishes, never blinkin' : stare anyone out o' face they would I reckon. From there, let's see——"

" You 'ad a 'alf hour's nap at the 'Quarium, Sam, on the settle," suggested Peter Austin.

" Did I ? Oh ! Ah ! O' course. ' What price the sin-o-ma ? ' Peter say, rousin' me up sudden. ' Sounds all right, more wakeful nor this, any'ow,' I says. So we offs there."

" 'E means the picture palaces, sir — movin' pictures and that," explained Ben Brindle.

" 'Tis all the same—they does make yer 'ead move too," said Austin.

" There was such a burst o' folk toilin' outside the turned-stile, I looks over their 'eads and I see a side entrance wi' a notice on it, about a ' many-cure : two to five : separate rooms, only a shilling.' ' 'Ere's one o' the shows,' I says to the others, ' this way—I'll stand the racket—foller me,' and they follers. A kind o' army orficer in uniform showed us into a lill' room,

and presently a squirt wi' a bonafide [1] on 'is chin——"

"Napoleon Bonaparte, Sam," said Peter.

"I wasn't referrin' to what 'e represented, or 'is name—but 'is chin. 'E come in and looks at me smilin': and I says: 'Where be the show to?' and 'e say 'Hee-ar, if you will be pleased to sit: 'ands or feet?' 'I ain't the circus,' I says, 'but I specks 'twill be both if you don't take this bob slippy and turn up the lights,' 'andin' 'im a shillin'. When 'e perduced a lill' tiddly knife, then I knowed 'im for an Eyetalian, and I started to get a 'old on 'is 'air' but there was no haft to 'im——"

"Whether that constitooted an act of trespass or a buttery on 'is 'ead——" began Peter reflectively.

"But 'twas me as was mistook seemin'ly, got into the wrong door, 'im bein' only a corn-wattler; so I dropped 'im, and proposed we should go for a smaddle in the sea-water—which we did.

"I give tuppence for a shrimpet-net; 'anged me boots and socks round me neck; and my punkaree not bein' a morsel o' use, I see Matilda's parasol stickin' in the sand——"

[1] An imperial.

" I never took one," said Mrs. Barter.

" Your pink one," said Sam, with very deliberate emphasis.

" I never took 'er," said Mrs. Barter.

" Well, it were some un's ; I got it outside in the cart now, and it kep' the sun off nicely, and we started and 'ad some fun."

" You lost a bootlace," said Austin.

" And wetted your breeches," said Ben Brindle.

" Never catched anythin' livelier than Ben's 'eel, but near landed 'im on 'is back twice. Then we shifted on to the cocoa-nuts."

" Barter, you refilled your bottle at the ' King o' Persia ' first," said Peter.

" Brindle wasn't makin' much practice at they nuts, but Peter was straight on the middle stump, times : and we was just 'avin' an argiment with the overseer as to what I thought I was throwin' at——"

" You was a bit wild, Sam," said Austin : " lost one ball out o' sight in the Merry-go-twiddle."

" And you catched the boss a full pitch on the elber, when 'e 'ad just called ' Over ' for to set the nuts," said Ben Brindle.

" Then Mr. Brindle say 'twas time we 'ad a cup o' tea at the ' Pig and Whistle.' On the road

there I buyed a toy for my lill' grandchild, and in we went—and was there when we was called to assist wi' the body."

" Which when it was washed up they laid in a chamber," cried Mrs. Knibb, amid renewed cries of order.

" Thanks, Barter," I said : " you have now accounted for your time up to the accident. Mrs. Barter, will you next bring us down to the same point in your day ? "

She began briskly, almost breathlessly.

" For a start we bought some nuts off the barrers : didn't us, Keziah ? And Mrs. Keitch set on a pail o' sea-enemies what belonged to one o' them bathin'-children, and we 'ad to glean 'em off 'er gownd again—red, white, and green-whiskered things, they was, like a caractus—wasn't they, Keziah ?—and she put a stitch in 'er petti' what she broke——"

" Get on, woman ! Don't dictate on the generals—keep to the martial facts," said Mr. Barter impatiently.

This necessitated a revision of Matilda's preconceived itinerary, and after a confused pause she went on with a somewhat more halting step.

" Then we took a bag o' shrimps, and I 'ad

a musical ride on a hemu, and Keziah spinned round on a mermaid. Next us walked up to the peepshows and see ourselves discontorted in bent mirrers."

" Oh my Lord ! Them mirrers ! " cried Mrs. Keitch.

" What made Keziah that giddy 'er started to cry."

" Oh my dear me ! " said Mrs. Keitch. " If you'd a seen Matilda and me inside o' them mirrers. . . ."

" Then we 'ad a paddle and I 'ad the great misfortune to lose me boots and stockin's . . ."

" You should ha' stringed 'em round yer neck," said her husband.

" Must ha' been misappropriation," suggested Peter.

" So I went up to the shops and bought me this pair of 'loshers."

Here she exhibited her feet in goloshes two sizes too large, and at the same time apologised for her bare legs in a parenthesis : " I got me plenty stockin's at 'ome."

" And I got me a new coalscuttle—we been one short in scuttles ever since——"

" Get on, woman, get on," said her husband.

" Then us went to a avaited bread shop for

tea. About eight I met wi' Sam, and 'andin' over the scuttle says we'll meet 'im at the station : and we went to the station to get a rest and see what was doin', and we was there when the 'earse come."

Here Mrs. Knibb once more tried to get in some scripture.

" Man as is borned a woman hath but a short——"

" Thank you, Mrs. Barter," I said, " that is all straightforward. Now, 'Appy, what about the doings of your party ? " I asked, seeing that Mr. Keitch was already fast asleep. So 'Appy in turn took up the narrative.

" Us started to 'ave some bumps wi' Aunt Selina——"

" With 'oo ? My Selina never come down," roared Ben Brindle.

" He means Aunt Sally," said Austin, " 'tis all the same."

" Then 'Ria and Levi 'ad a turn in a swing boat, but got stopped along o' Levi refusin' to loose 'is rope. Deceased and me got our photers took. But there wasn't much doin', so I went up town to a chemist and 'ad me a tooth drawed : and then Levi and me went to see the fishbone manure fact'ry while 'Ria took 'er tea. 'Bout

eight in the evenin', for ventilation we all 'ired a skiff and went for a float on the sea along o' two other strangers. Twenty minutes out 'Ria was took retchin' somethin' amazin', and say she must get out on the rocks, there bein' no leveridge for 'er in the skiff.

" When we got near she took and jumpit out for 'em—missed—turned a somerset—and was in the sea. Levi throwed 'er one o' the oars (we 'ad two, yer see) and give 'er quite a spat side o' the 'ead, what silly'd 'er, and cut a large flower out of 'er bonnut. A right good shot it was! Then I took and rowed 'ard wi' 'tother oar; but the skiff wouldn't do nothin', only circle round and round: a giddy builded thing must ha' been, I reckon. 'Owever we got a 'old on 'Ria, and on the oar what she never reached, and as she were onsensible and too weighty to 'eave into the ship, ' 'Old 'er 'ead above,' I says, and took and rowed 'ome as brisk as brisk. When we grouted on the sand she was gone! "

" And her place could nowhere be found," chanted Louisa Knibb to cries of " Order! "

" There stood a empty fish-barrer on the beach what belonged to a sailorman: so we popped 'er on it, throwed a sail-cloth over 'er, and one o' the strangers what 'ad joined our party and what

knowed the town, give me and Levi a 'and to run 'er up to the doctor, what lives next the 'Pig and Whistle' public (that was about nine-fifteen): and 'earin' Mr. Barter's voice singin' in the bar, I calls 'im and the other two out, and we all runs the barrer into the surgery, and tells the liver'ed lad what ope's the door to bring the doctor quick.

"'E showed us into the waitin'-room, and presently doctor come in quite pleasant and we tells 'im all the 'appenin', and arsts 'im to kindly look through what lay in the surgery."

"Now we see through a glass darkly," said Mrs. Knibb.

"'I *'ave* a done already,' 'e says: and then 'e arsts if we 'ad no woman or relative o' the body, and we says, 'No, she'm the only remains of a man what's gone': so 'e sadly shakes 'is 'ead and goes out, mutterin' to 'isself.

"Presently 'e sends us a message by the liver'ed nipper, not to wait, nothin' anyone can do: better take the barrer and go 'ome patient, and foller mournin'. 'Twas only what we expected. Outside in the road we finds the barrer reverentially covered over wi' sackin', so we agrees among ourselves to say nothin' at the station, as 'twould only make things awkward and expensive in the

bookin', if we took and explained the hinside of the barrer."

" ' Live stock ' bein' ruled out," explained Peter Austin, " 'twas a question whether the barrow would come under ' personal effects,' ' 'ouse'old furniture ' or just ' goods ' : so we agreed to smuggle it and await issues."

" We sets out, votin' Mr. Brindle into the shafts, 'e 'avin' nothin' in 'is 'ands. Yer see, Mr. Barter was kep' busy wi' a large teddy-bear, a coal-scuttle, and a parasol : Mr. Austin 'ad Mr. Barter's shrimpit-net, and four cocoa-nuts——"

" Five it was then," said Peter.

" Mr. Keitch 'ad a large air-ball concern tied on to 'is coat button, what give 'im a deal o' trouble, as well as a crab, and some toys for 'is children : and I 'ad a basket o' winkles, a starred fish, and some ribbons o' seaweed what I picked up. At the station we was just in time—but only just—and the guard took and shoved the barrer into the van wi'out so much as a ' by your leave,' which was just what us wanted."

At this juncture 'Appy's feelings overcame him ; so violently laying hold on the lobe of his right ear, he led himself out of the shed.

" Does 'im credit, pore feller," moaned Mrs. Keitch : " wonnerful feelin' man."

" There was always a soft spot in Sparks," agreed Mrs. Barter.

" Can the ether-opiate change my spots ? " said Mrs. Knibb.

" If I might bring the 'istory up to date, sir," volunteered Mr. Austin, " there be only this to add. We'd got into the train, when a bloke come to the winder and say we've took 'is carridge. ' Fust come, fust served,' I says : ' Not in my callin',' 'e say, tryin' to force 'is way in. So Mr. Barter took and explained through the winder, and left 'im sittin' on a basket o' fish, dabbin' 'is chin wi' a 'andful o' waste. Doubtless Sam 'ad made the law clear to 'im, though there seemed no sense to 'im at all. That was the only trouble we 'ad ridin' 'ome."

" What about Levi ? " asked Mrs. Keitch. " And the terrible job I was at keepin' 'im off the alarm 'andle and the winderstraps ? *My* 'ands was full, any'ow ! "

" At the station Mr. Barter's pony-cart met 'im, and we borrowed a donkey and tied 'im into the barrow, and we all walked 'ere—Mr. and Mrs. Barter in their lill' gig actin' rear-guard. 'Twas a sad process whatever."

" The ass stood to the carcase," said Mrs. Knibb.

At this point 'Appy returned and whispered dramatically :

" I took me a peep, and she'm changin' colour muchly, bein' terrible knocked about the face."

It was now my turn to sum up.

" Well, my friends, having heard all your sad story, there is one point upon which you appear to have made a serious blunder. I am not blaming you, all you have done I am sure you intended for the best, but an inquest will have to be held, and held at Sefton Sands where the body was brought ashore. You made a mistake in bringing it here."

" We all knowed that, sir," said Brindle, " but our tickets would ha' prob'ly been forfeit unless we come by the ten o'clock train—and the deceased's entirely wasted. Again, yer see, 'twas the doctor's plain orders."

" I'm doubtin' 'ow *'is* leave affects the law though," said Peter.

" Well," I continued, " whatever is to happen to-morrow remains to be seen. It is all terribly sad : but the best piece of advice I can give you at this moment is for all to go home to bed, and I will see into the whole matter at daybreak. We can do nothing more to-night."

We were all shaking hands and taking leave of

each other in the roadway, when who should come up but P.C. Morkell! To him I told the bare facts of the case, and he undertook charge of the barrow and its contents till morning.

As last words were being said, while Morkell wheeled the hand-barrow out of the yard, a figure was seen shuffling along the road towards us. Instantly everyone recognised in this an added pain: the figure was undoubtedly poor witless Tommy, 'Ria's son!

The silence of a great pity fell upon the company: no one moved a single step, but all with one consent looked at me.

"You must tell 'im, sir," whispered John: "I will take 'im in for the night afterwards, and see to 'im: but you must break it!"

So I went forward and took Tommy on one side. Touching his hat, he began: "Please, sir, mother says——"

"Pore lamb—so innercent!" groaned Mrs. Keitch.

"She being dead yet speaketh," said Mrs. Knibb.

"Mother says if I see any of 'em, I was to say she'm all right, as they'm like to be anxious."

"When did you see mother, Tommy?"

" See 'er ? " he asked, large-eyed : " why, not ten minutes back-along in 'er bed."

" Are you quite sure, my lad ? "

" 'Er says : ' Tell 'em they done quite right to leave me and come 'ome as they done. I 'eard the doctor's message plain, what 'e give to the buttoned boy : ' Tell 'em not to wait, there's nothin' any o' they can do 'ere : best take the barrer and go 'ome, the patient will foller in the mornin'. Pack o' idiots they is.' And doctor sent 'er 'ome," continued Tommy, " near on midnight—next train then—and 'er was drove up from the station in an 'ired cab, as purty a drive as she ever 'ad, she say. And now I be come for a drop o' vinegar off Master Turkey for 'er 'ead, what aches terrible."

During this recital Mr. Barter and his wife had mounted their cart, and in common with all the rest had gradually edged up closer and closer to catch Tommy's words, and make sure he was using all the little sense with which nature had endowed him.

As he ended, Mr. Barter's patience was exhausted and he shouted " 'Ome, pony," but before he could take the reins (always an afterthought with Sam) the pony had already started. In a moment the gig collided violently with P.C.

Morkell's hand-barrow, overturning into the road all its contents : some dozen cocoa-nuts, wrapped up in the sacking and paraphernalia incident to a cocoa-nut stall, and a much-abused Aunt Sally!

After one moment's hush of awe, by common consent the pent-up feelings of those present found characteristic expression.

"Bumpsy Selina! My golly!" said 'Appy, rubbing his chin with great violence.

"Lumme! But 'tis a master judgment," cried Peter Austin.

"The narrerest shave ever," chimed in Ben Brindle.

"O my Lord! Where be my milkin'-stool to?" asked Levi Keitch piteously.

"My dear me! Now don't act silly, Levi—come!" said Keziah Keitch.

"I feels just 'ow I looked in them mirrers, Keziah," sobbed Matilda Barter, as she dried her eyes in Sam's puggaree.

Sam Barter deliberately backed his pony some twenty yards up the road, and then spoke.

"Depend upon it, that's what the bloke meant at the station: I mind now 'twas the same I shied at on the sands: we must a' took 'is carridge in mistake, outside the surgery. 'Ome, pony!"

And then he drove viciously at a hand-gallop clean over the wooden figure on the road, almost throwing out Matilda.

" This ain't been beat since Master Eutyclus," cried Louisa Knibb.

For the last ten years I have not heard John Turkey laugh as he did then.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SQUIRE OF THE WOODS

IF, among the characters of Hawkescombe, I have left poor Pat Lambert to the last, I have my reasons. They are, perhaps, not easy to put down, though the chief of them seems to me the fact that he was the strangest of them all, a man apart and not to be ranked with others.

It was during one of my autumn rambles, not so many months after my arrival at Hawkescombe, that I was hailed when passing a somewhat lonely cottage by the mother of a lengthy family and asked to step within. Would I be pleased to advise how to punish the latest misdeed of No. 11—now a-bed upstairs? Though only eight, Grace had played truant from school not once nor twice, but thrice of late, and trouble was brewing with the Attendance Officer. Beside this there were offences graver even than truancy from school; and the very worst had been committed by *her* child, of all people in the world. She had actually been up to Pat's Pitch, with the

result that she was blasted, probably for life, "wi' the bladder-pimps and other interval addictions!" [1]

With many apologies, since Grace was not presentable to anyone, least of all to me, I was ushered into the bedroom: and was soon able to wink the mother out of the room and gain the confidence of the sinner. The cause of the rash and pains from which the mite was suffering was fairly obvious; and I soon got her own confirmation of my suspicions that it had been a tremendous overdose of unripe blackberries. It was these which had tempted her to skip school. They grew in abundance near Pat's Pitch. In a word, she had rushed in where other angelic children in the upper standards had feared to tread.

After bribing her with the promise that, if she was well by Sunday week, kept away from Pat's Pitch, and was regular at school till Christmas, I would give her a box of chocolates, I left Grace quite happy. The extortion of such promises of virtue I felt to be sufficient penance. But alas! In my ignorance I fear I must have confirmed her innocent mind in the detestation in which Pat's Pitch should be held by all self-respecting people. For when I told the anxious mother that the mis-

[1] Probably "internal afflictions."

creant only needed a short course of physic to put her right, she was very sceptical and I was given my first warning about the outcast Pat, root of all local mischief.

" I'm takin' it very kind o' you, sir, to be troublin' wi' the likes o' Grace. She'm a darin' bit o' goods, what don't think o' what 'er pranks and pringles may perduce. About the med'cine now : I were just a goin' to give 'er a rubbin' —if 'er wouldn't swaller it, which I don't believe for a moment as 'er will, not till 'er father come 'ome, any'ow—out o' this bottle. 'Tis a fine thing, and did my man a power o' good two year back-along when 'e took 'im a terrible cold on 'is chest. And I give a 'ole new bottle to my eldest girl, Rebecca, when she was to bed wi' 'er first. Oh ! bless y', yes, I gotten four grandchildren then—so I 'as."

But as the bottle contained two doses of " Owbridge's Lung Tonic," I urged her to use my own prescription sooner than its contents, and she replaced it on the shelf against the next fatality in the household, saying :

" I never likes to be wi'out a drop o' some'at pattent in the 'ouse : we never know what may come, and as I were sayin', it did Will'um more good than nothin'. For the most part, o' course,

we'm makin' our own bits o' tonics and that. But there isn't none as I knows what'll be a anti-dose to *'er* trouble. Y'see she been up Castle Down, and all round Pat's Pitch, O my Lawk-a-daisies! O' course 'e might 'a seen and looked at 'er, and again 'e mightn't. But 'tis misfortunate—so 'tis!"

That was my first intimation of there being anything amiss with Castle Down, and indeed of the very existence of Pat's Pitch. But as time went on I was destined to learn so much more by many side channels, that my interest grew until I neglected no chance of picking up all I could by talking with the older folk, specially those living in the remoter parts of the hills. I was very soon driven to the conclusion that superstition was more deeply rooted in these country folk than I could have believed without evidence. Not that anyone would confess for a moment to belief in witchcraft, possession, necromancy or the like: indeed, when I suggested such notions they became highly indignant, but, in the same breath, would ask me how I—or anyone else—could account for certain undisputed events for which so many could vouch? There must be something very wrong, very unusual, very much to be avoided up to Pat's

Pitch : and that he exercised a malign influence—call it the evil eye, or what you will—not compatible with orthodox respectability, was firmly established in the minds of many.

Of course this was chiefly the case with the older women, some of whom vowed it would take a good deal to induce them to venture over Castle Down by themselves, specially of a night when it was known to be Pat's wont to wander in the pursuit of his more than doubtful cults. The children were brought up in healthy fear of the locality, mention of it generally being made in a mysterious whisper : the most awful threat for insubordination being, " I'll be leavin' y' up to Pat's Pitch—so I will ! "

Thus from one I had the following :

" Me neighbour, Mrs. Drummett, she'll be tellin' you what 'er suffered—and she'm a strong 'oman whose nervites wouldn't be trailin' about to be easy stepped on—she telled me one evenin', when 'er were overtook by a splash o' thunder, and refuged in me cottage till it might 'a spit its worst, and we 'ad a cup o' tea together, she telled me o' the day 'er were takin' Mrs. 'Iggins' butter to market : a terrible 'ot, suppressin' day 'twas, and 'er wi' a long tramp to do too ; she telled me as 'ow, when cuttin' over the Down Common to

make time, 'er see old Pat a-grinnin' out of 'is winder at 'er what made 'er 'aste by: and 'er got to town all right, but (you mightn't believe it) when 'er got to the grocer all the butter was turned—bad, you understand—rinsed, you call it—and 'er only gotten ninepence a pound for it, and come 'ome lookin' miserable and rejected —so 'er did."

From another:

"Oh! but it's a twisted gizzard Pat's got in 'im, must 'ave. Why, my Caroline, Carrie we calls 'er then, she were set by the fire when 'er were about two year old, and pop went the stick I 'ad put on the fire to boil me kettle, and set 'er little clothes lighted. Hadn't I been in-and-outin' the room and found 'er, it must 'a got all over 'er. As 'twas the leg were roasted like a bit o' pork in two places. And then I found out as my lad Bob must 'a gone and gathered that faggot up to 'Ollycombe, just below Castle Down where Pat's Pitch be to. Nothin's safe from there —no, tain't."

Once again:

"You'm not thinkin' as old Pat's 'e'm a bad lot? Weren't Master Noldart's she'p dog, Beller, as good a dog as there never wasn't no betterer then, weren't 'er bitted by a viper-adder-serpint

up to the Down? And 'er never doin' no 'arm not to no one. Oh! things bain't right up to 'Olwell Tor. And 'aven't I 'ad an aperient of 'is workin's meself? My Dolly were just goin' five then, and was set at play on the pitchin's, when a neighbour what were passin', come in 'oldin' the child up by 'eels, and black in the face 'er looked. I went a'most lamented in the 'ead. 'Pat 'er on the back—'ard,' she say, 'she'm swallerin' some'at': and as 'er speaked out dropped a large brazen-brass button from 'er mouth. And we all reckonised it as must 'a come off of Pat's old red coat. Must 'a give it 'er for the purpose, you know! And where's 'e come from I like to know?"

Once more:

"I mind when Mrs. Bennett, what lived up to Pitts, went 'ome one bitter night, and say to 'er Master, she say, 'I seen old Pat at 'is grim-bozzles as I took me over the Common.' It were one o' the lastest words 'er ever speaked. In a forty-night 'er died—so 'er did: breaked out top to bottom wi' the ippi-chrysalises,[1] and them did for 'er, poor thing, and 'er only seventy-four. But the next chapter put the 'at a'top of it. There bein' no road, only a tract over the Down, the

[1] Erysipelas.

carriers was all old friends o' Master Bennett's, and 'ad walked wi' the coffin over a mile: and when they come neighbourly to Pat's Pitch the corpse screamed—so it did! They dropped 'er down and runned for it and I'm not blamin' 'em. One lost 'is beaver 'at, a brimble catched it by the crape band and left three bushes in 'is cheeks—so it did. Poor Master Bennett, they telled me, were the only one what wouldn't leave the coffin, but set on it to offend 'er in case anythin' come along, and waited there till them others come back, tappin' on it wi' 'is pipe at internals to content 'er like. Must 'a been an uncommon good 'oman for to make old Pat so spiteful at 'er and 'er screwed down too. No one know where 'e come from: but 'tis as plain as y'ur 'and be'ind y'ur face 'twas no good place.

"And o' course, sir, you must 'a bin telled about the old well up to the Tor. No? Oh! They do say—my father and grandfather I 'eard tell scores o' times—as somewheres thereabouts is a everlastin' spring o' liquid water: and in the old days folks believed as it could cure babies o' diseases if they took and dipped 'em in it. Sounds like a piece o' fool's silliness, so it do: but we never know what we believe down 'ere, do we? And if 'twas true, it makes old Pat

worser, pitchin' 'isself next a 'eavenly water and defyin' the spirits what lived in it. I lay 'e've scared 'em back 'ome afore now."

From the men I could get little. But if the younger and hardier smiled at these old wives' fables, several of the older could not forget events which seemed associated with the evil luck attributable to Pat. For instance, it was certain that, when he acted for a time as drover of cattle to and from market for farmers, in more than one case several had died later of red-water. It was certain, at least in one instance, that a cow after feeding on the Common slipped her calf. Equally certain it was that farmer Higgins lost a pony with a broken leg on the Down. And it was common knowledge that no cattle did well up there. Thus the commoners' right to feed cattle there had long been foregone: it was always best to be on the safe side.

From the vicar in whose parish the common lay, I could get nothing beyond the fact that he had long ceased to visit the hovel in which Pat Lambert lived. Indeed, he had only once done so. For one thing it was too far away, and for another, though he had twice spoken to the man, he appeared to be the roughest of rough ignoramuses, and nothing could be made of him. My friend

was afraid, indeed, that Pat had a past better forgotten, although he really knew nothing tangible against the man.

When attempting to piece together the facts I had collected I found they made but a sorry patch-work. Where the man had come from originally was unknown to any : and that in itself, quite obviously, was the tap-root of early suspicion. He was not even Zummerzet, much less a Hill-man. He was quite young when he had bought the freehold of the house and garden, which had previously belonged to a squatter named Squires, who went up England way and disappeared. Pat had brought a youthful wife with him, who in turn increased suspicion by associating with absolutely no one. For a year and more he had worked as extra woodman on the Manor, but had been dismissed owing to the unpleasant tales spread abroad on all sides. Passers by the Common, and it was more freely used at that time as a short cut to several places, had heard piercing screams coming from the cottage both by day and night : and it was as certain as could be that the man was a fiend of cruelty to his poor wife. But before action could be taken in her defence she had suddenly disappeared—whither, there could be little doubt !

To one intrepid enquirer who bearded Pat and demanded explanation, none was forthcoming. But he was told in sulphurous language, accompanied by a grimace so grotesque that he said it could only be likened to "a church gargle," to mind his own business and that as quickly as might be. No one in his senses could doubt that murder had been done, even if the police said the man's wife had run away. But in the light of subsequent events, and Pat's continued exercise of evil influence on man and beast, it was recalled that just at the very time of her disappearance a nanny-goat was seen for the first time at his Pitch. Could there be any connection? "Not really, o' course," but the head-shaking which followed showed the speaker far from being satisfied: "Well, we never know what we believe down 'ere, do we?" Anyhow, the billy-goat which arrived a few days later than the nanny was as sweetly familiar with old Pat as he was bitterly hostile to all intruders. And someone had suggested that horns and a red coat did not exactly savour of Christian charity: "which again, o' course, must be just silliness, but——"

My curiosity thus aroused, it was perhaps natural that I should make bird-watching an

excuse to visit at intervals the scene of so much disaster. I took no notice of the man on meeting him in his faded red hunting-coat, which I did occasionally, beyond a friendly passing of the time of day: but even this met with no response better than a surly growl. I had to leave it at that till a more favourable opportunity presented itself.

Nor did I find the excuse an idle one, for the locality proved full of interest for a naturalist. Castle Down is a spur on a stretch of high table-land, severely wind-swept as the stunted heather and bent thorn-bushes show. It is boulder-strewn, and pock-marked with little dells filled with patches of gorse and bracken, but carpeted for the most part with hard, coarse grass. On the west the tableland stretches away a long distance, and on the north side the hills fall abruptly into a bog beneath: but on the east and south, once over the crest, the slope is clothed in a tangle of brush-wood and rotten timber, and is full of springs and boggy ground which ends in a dense wood hanging steeply over the valley. Immediately upon the brow of this descent occurs an outcrop of sandstone known as Holwell Tor: and it is some hundred and fifty yards west of this that one suddenly comes upon Pat's Pitch sitting in a

little hollow. It is a small, one-storied cottage built of the boulders of the district and white-washed, with a garden on three sides, the whole surrounded by turf walls. The roof is a coarse thatch of reeds from the bog below, kept in place with hurdles and wisps of straw weighted with stone slabs. When first caught sight of on the common, the roof alone is visible, owing to the hollow in which the cottage sits, and it resembles nothing so much as a bee-skip. A spring issues from the turf not ten yards from the door, and the water is caught in a circular dipping-hole, the overflow trickling away until it is lost in the undergrowth below.

It was a wild situation and one that appealed to me by its solitary grandeur.

It was on a glorious evening towards the end of May, when returning from a long ramble in the woods below—frequented by the spotted woodpeckers, and (as I regretted to discover for the first time that day) by at least one pair of Little Owls—that I mounted Castle Down and sheltered for a time to watch a buzzard hawking moths and beetles, always a most fascinating sight. As the darkness drew on a passing curlew now and again whistled his plaintive call overhead : owls were waking in the woods and calling

to remind one another that it was time to be on the move. At length I rose too, and whilst taking one last look at the after-glow in the western sky, and then at its reflected colour on the trees beneath me, I caught sight of a pole stuck in a little clearing in the wood. If I was not much mistaken it had a spring tooth-trap on top to catch the harmless, the invaluable owls. This was an advertisement of criminal ignorance and wanton cruelty which I could not leave. I went down into the hollow, and with some difficulty swarming up the post I succeeded first in springing and then pocketing the beastly thing. I was preparing to descend, wondering what damage would overtake my knickers were I to slide, when I glanced down to find the grinning countenance of Pat, on guard beneath. Next moment we stood face to face. He cut a weird figure to be sure : and for a moment I could almost forgive the folk their superstitions. He was a short, stubby figure, and wore no hat : a sack was thrown over his shoulders in place of the old faded hunting-coat, while his corduroy trousers were hitched up at the knee high enough to leave several inches of sockless flesh showing above his boots. He had a clean-shaven face, a shock of tousled grey hair, and heavy eyebrows growing over

curiously blue-grey eyes with double rings round the iris. One nostril was larger than the other, and one eyelid drooped, while a distortion of the upper lip gave the mouth a most sardonic grin. At such close quarters I could take a good look at him, and he appeared to be as interested in myself. At length I opened conversation.

"Well, Mr. Lambert, did you think I was going to fall?"

After a moment's pause, and without taking his eyes off me, he asked in a low but not unpleasant voice:

"What 'a you done wi' 'er?"

"Taken it away," I replied: "it's in my pocket."

"What'll you be doin' wi' 'er?"

"I don't know: it's not my property."

"I knows that: 'tis keeper's—the fool. Do away wi' 'er, see? Bury 'er. I been watchin' of y' last hour and more. Why do y' come messin' 'ere-abouts? 'Tis to find some'at, I knows that! 'Tis no good for to tell me a lie. I seen it in y'ur face, times: you'm lookin' for some'at. Now 'ave y' found 'im?"

"Yes, birds, beetles, moths, and all sorts of things. I love them."

" I knowed it ! Me too. But I reckon we'm both lookin' for some'at more than they."

I smiled at his earnestness, and this seemed to please rather than irritate him.

" Look y' 'ere," he continued, as we strolled up the wood in the direction of his Pitch : " I'll be tellin' y' straight. I come down under yon pole a' purpose to scare y'—but you'm not scare-able, seemin'ly. And you better not be tellin' no one as we meeted, or likely they'll be lookin' for some trouble comin' to y'—the fools. You'm the only man—to say *man*, then—I seen since I'm livin' 'ere, and I beg pardon for tryin' it on."

" Don't trouble to, Lambert. Have a pipe of ' baccy,' " and I handed him my pouch.

" So I will, parson or no parson, danged if I don't ! I'm going to talk—so I be."

And having filled and lighted his pipe, Pat began in a confidential undertone.

" I'm lookin' for some'at same as y'urself about the wild things, and may-be we'm both after the same, and might 'elp one another a point. 'Tis the Squire o' the 'oods I'm 'untin'. You can't 'elp but feel 'im close to y' when you'm in the 'oods by y'urself—no one can't, but a fool. You know what I mean ? "

"Yes, I think so, Lambert. I always feel there is something very, very mysterious in a wood."

"I knows nothin' about the mistress, 'tis the Master I'm after: what's allus lookin' at y', and whipserin' to y', and 'idin' from y', and laughs times and cries times, and 'is shadder makes you feel 'im passin' close wi'out touchin' of y'. 'Tis the Squire what never sleeps night nor day: what learns the lampworm [1] to light 'er wick, and tickles the churn-owl [2] till 'e purrs: what flies along o' the flit-mouse [3] and guides 'im safe from anythin' what might touch 'im, 'cause 'e can't see for 'isself like. What thatches the mouse that tight into 'er skip so as we calls 'er door-mouse 'cause there ain't one. What tucks the caterpillar into 'is quilt, and then turns 'im into a butterfly: and 'elps Maggie [4] to put up 'er numbriller over 'er chicks. What learns the mew-eagle [5] to pretty 'is nest to please 'is missus, and the snipe to please 'is old girl by playin' on 'is 'arp to 'er as she'm settin'. What guides the sextons,[6] tellin' 'em where the buryin' wants doin': and shows the tipsy-bibs [7] and the

[1] Glow-worm.
[2] Night-jar.
[3] Bat.
[4] Magpie.
[5] Buzzard.
[6] Burying beetles.
[7] Water-wagtails.

kingcocks [1] and the pea-pigs [2] and the ibbits [3] all the tricks o' their trades. You'm likely laughin' at me backside o' y'ur face."

"No, Lambert, no: indeed I am not."

"The Squire, then, what nurses and looks arter 'em all, and makes 'em betterer nor all the men and women, and does just as 'e minds to in the 'oods—I wants to meet 'im; I wants to see 'im; I wants 'is 'elp very pertickler. 'Twas to get up right-sides of 'im as I first give up killin' and eatin' the wild things. Then the more I'm watchin' of 'em the more beautifuller I'm findin' 'e makes 'em and learns 'em. Can't 'urt 'em, I can't, and they knows it: must do: and so must Squire what looks to 'em. What I'm wantin' to learn is ow' 'em gets up-sides wi' 'im, to learn 'ow 'e does 'em that careful and learns 'em that clever. Day and night I'm 'untin' 'im—so I be! Be that what you'm after now?"

"Yes."

"I knowed it. What for?"

"For the same reason as you, Pat—to learn."

"Me too. But learn what?"

"What He is like."

[1] Woodcocks. [2] Hedgehogs. [3] Lizards.

"Like? You'm not wantin' no 'elp, then?"

"Yes, I am."

"Me too! I knowed it! 'Elp for what, now?"

"To be like Him."

"Ha! Ha! What ridicklous—yet I don't know: p'raps I does want to be like 'im, too, in a way o' speakin', 'cause you see I've come to love they wild things: them's all I got, and I wants to act kind and clever to 'em. I don't know nothin' about parsons, and that: you and me be far different there: but we'm close in this 'unt o' the Squire o' the 'oods, eh?"

"Your religion and mine are not so far apart, Pat: the spirit of the woods you and I are hunting is the God we believe in and worship."

"What? What's your churches for then?"

"We build them to His honour—not to keep Him in. He is in the woods, and fields, and everywhere; and if we believe in Him we can worship Him not only in churches, but anywhere—indeed, the worship He loves best is our imitating Him in love and tenderness."

"I don't know nothin' about all that—was never to school."

"Yes, you do. You feel Him close beside you

in the woods : you hunt after Him—so you must believe He is there."

" I knows it ! "

" And you love His animals, and act kindly to them as He does. You hate what He hates—cruelty. You love what He loves—beauty. You admire the care He takes of the creatures, and the things He has taught them. It is He Himself has taught you all this, and when you do it. . . ."

" I allus do it—well now, anyways ! "

" Yes, and that is your worship. The chief difference between us, Pat, is the name we give Him. You call Him Squire, or better, Master, but I think mine is best, ' Spirit,' or ' God,' which means ' the good.' "

" Well, no matter. I wants to see 'im'."

" So do I, but we can't."

" Can't ? Wild things do, I know. Is it cause 'e'm too fine, or too big for we ? "

" Too big. But we shall some day if we go on hunting Him, and do what He likes us to do. And meantime we can both talk to Him."

" So I do—by meself. Sounds silly, too. But will he do what I wants, and 'elp me same as 'e do them ? "

" Yes, if it's a good and kind thing you want."

" Then I'm on the right tract so far, eh ? "

" Yes."

A long silence fell between us, as we now sat side by side upon the Tor. Presently I glanced sideways at Pat, and was so amazed at the change in his face that I almost jumped up from my seat : the frown had gone, the drooping eyelid and the twisted lip, no trace of them was left, the face was smooth and quite good to look upon.

" Can you tell me, Lambert, why people are so afraid of you ? It's not an idle question, and don't answer it if you would rather not ; but I don't understand."

" O' course you don't. They thinks me mad, and damned, and all the rest of it—so they do : and I wants 'em to. I wants to be left alone. Listen and I'll be tellin' y' the blessed lot—only I'm trustin' y' not to tell no one, see ? Another fill o' y'ur baccer, I'll thank y' for it. I wants to be left alone, and when folks comes moiderin' around they pervents me gettin' up-sides o' the Squire : they'm the only thing what seems to drive 'im away, and 'e don't come back for ever so long. I come 'ere directly after me and Lucy was married. Me wife 'ad got 'er into trouble —bad trouble too—no matter what : but I got 'er out of it, and bringed 'er 'ere where no one

wouldn't know 'er, and I could pertect 'er : and 'er didn't want to know no one, and I said 'er shouldn't. She were afflicted, poor soul, and 'ad fits come on 'er when 'er screamed for a 'alf 'our at a time. Nothin' I could do would 'elp 'er, and 'er wouldn't 'ave no one but me a'near 'er. O' course I got me into trouble over it, and lost me places—thought I were cruel to 'er—but that didn't matter so long as I could keep 'er 'appy like. You never minds a bit o' bother an you loves anyone. I got us a livin', as I do now, by gatherin' the simples and sellin' in the towns, but I 'as to go long-ways-away where they don't know me. I picks the blackberries and sells 'em for colour : [1] and this wi' a little bit o' me own what I got, and me fowls, and garden and such-like, we does all right. Well, we lived 'ere three years and then Lucy 'ad a child, but wouldn't 'ave no 'oman nigh 'er only me : 'er clinged to me. Us managed all right, but the child were informed—bad luck for it ! 'Twas then I got a goat for the milk, and 'ave kep' some ever since : they'm fine things. About two months arter, when I were out one morning, a gipple 'oman come along and 'ad a tell wi' my missus whether 'er would or no : Lucy 'er telled me of it when

[1] The dye works.

I come 'ome at tea. And that evenin' 'er went out wi' the child, and 'er never come back, no 'er didn't. Days I'm waitin', but 'er never come. I 'unted all round, but never 'eard a word of 'er : I found the gipple 'oman and 'er telled me all 'er 'ad telled the missus, and 'twas from that I got to know what chanced. Lucy 'er thinks to cure the child by dippin' of it in a well o' water below 'ere. 'Tis said to cure the informed and such : and by mistake 'er must 'a over-dosed it, 'twas but a mite of a thing, and drownded it. That must 'a frighted 'er out of 'er 'ead, weren't never strong, and 'er offed and never come 'ome. I know, 'cause I found the little 'un at last by watchin' which way the Squire guided the rats. I found it, and took and buried it deep in a biscuit box, in same place just where Lucy 'ad just covered it over wi' stones and that, poor thing. 'Twas then, feelin' lonely and soft arter my missus and the child, as I started feelin' the Squire o' the 'oods wi' me : I were wantin' some'at to 'elp me, and I watched 'ow good 'e were to the wild things : and more I took notice, more I wanted 'is 'elp to bring 'er back and keep me company like. O' course I never told no one about nothin' : 'twould shame 'er, and 'er sufferin' enough a'ready : folks was afeard o'

me long afore which kep' 'em away, and now they said I'd took and done away wi' both wife and child—so they did. And to keep 'em from peerin' about, and to leave me to meself, I kep' up the fun o' bein' bad, and learned me tricks wi' me eye, and me nose, and me lip, till they was scared clean away and never come nigh me—just what I'm wantin'. So there 'tis. There's only two things i' the world my Lucy she'm lovin' —'tis me and the kid : 'er'll come back one day to one of us, if not afore, leastways when 'er knows 'er time be runnin' out. Oh ! 'er will and I'm allus on the watch, and don't want no folks about when 'er comes. I wants the Squire to take and guide 'er 'ome to me, and tell me when she'm comin', see ? Think 'e will, an I'm kind to 'is wild things, and talks a bit more to 'im by meself ? "

" Yes, Lambert, yes ! "

" Then, you see, if so be she'm on 'er last and dyin'-like, and I 'ouldn't wonder, I can bury 'er along o' the child, no one don't know where. 'Er sure to like that : never could abide no one else nigh 'er. I promised to pertect 'er when I took 'er. Then I shall 'a done all as I can, and my job'll be done, so 'twill. Nothin' don't matter arter that. I'm glad as you'm thinkin' we'm

not far apart: and you might put in a word or two for us when you'm in the 'oods times and you'm feelin' 'im close and busy there 'elpin' things: you'm knowin' better nor me. But I 'ouldn't wonder an I took me a peep through the church winder meself one night, when no one's peerin' about, and I'm quit o' my task for 'er, but that must come afore nothin' else. And you've fixed y'ur mind as I must do wi'out seein' 'im?"

"Yes, Lambert."

"So I will, then: I specks we'll win an we sticks to 'im patient-like."

"Nothing surer, Pat: we can't fail."

"'Tis good 'earin', so 'tis. I'm trustin' you a deal, and you give me y'ur oath—no, I'm not wantin' it! Yes—I'll take y'ur 'and, 'tis enough—and good night to y'. Take and 'ide that thing in y'ur pockert, mind!"

Two years later, not far from his parish church, Pat Lambert's body was found one winter's night in a ditch by the roadside, and the vicar who could not himself conscientiously use the Prayer Book Burial Service over him, gave me permission to do so.

As I sit on Holwell Tor and watch the wild,

and listen to the distant voices of the children round the blackberry bushes, I often think of Pat, and wonder if and where he met his wife. At least his other quest is won, and he can see his Squire of the Woods.

Printed in Great Britain at
The Mayflower Press, Plymouth,
William Brendon & Son, Ltd.